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2nd Edition

Mythology

for dummies®

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Discover how mythology intersects across cultures

Take an inside look at your favorite mythological characters

See how myths persist and evolve

Amy Hackney Blackwell, PhD
Christopher W. Blackwell, PhD

Mythology

2nd Edition

by Amy Hackney Blackwell, PhD and Christopher W. Blackwell, PhD

for dummies®
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Mythology For Dummies® 2nd Edition

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Introduction

Mythology For Dummies, 2nd edition, is about the stories people tell that really matter. The telling of myths may be one of the most important things human beings do. Everyone tells myths. Every culture of every time produces myths. Put together all these myths, and you come up with the subject of mythology, a vast body of stories about heroes, gods, spirits, monsters, and forces of nature.

To understand mythology is to understand human beings. That's why myths are worth thinking about. Just like human beings, myths can be stirring, inspirational, funny, and beautiful. On the other hand, just like human beings, myths can be complicated, cruel, violent, obscene, or just (seemingly) absurd.

About This Book

This book is meant to be a quick reference for anyone who wants to discover the basics of world mythology. We've organized it into chapters that deal with specific topics; if you have a particular interest, you can just read the pertinent chapters and not bother with the rest of the book. Or you can read the whole thing but in any order you like. Though we devote a big chunk of the book to *classical mythology* (Greek and Roman myths), we also try to cover as much of the world as possible.

One important thing to remember: We take myths very seriously; Mythology is religion. Some of the myths in this book are stories from cultures that don't exist or religions no one practices anymore. Others are myths from cultures and religions that are alive and important to millions of people the world over today.

Don't get us wrong; we're not saying that myths aren't funny. Many myths are really funny, and they're supposed to be. Neither are we saying that our entire discussion of myths is serious, because it isn't. We want this book to be engaging and entertaining, so we have fun talking about mythology with the hope that you have fun reading about mythology. But when we say that something is a myth, we're *not* saying that it's false or wrong.

Many other books on mythology often include complicated analysis of myths and try to convince you what different myths may mean about a civilization or culture. But in this book, we give you a fun overview of exciting tales from around the world. Don't worry; we explain any theoretical or technical concepts as we go along, but we mainly want to tell stories!

Here are a few things to keep in mind as you read this book:

- We list dates in terms of BCE (Before the Common Era) and CE (Common Era). Most scholars refer to dates in this way rather than BC (Before Christ) and AD (*Anno Domini,* or "In the Year of Our Lord") because the new abbreviations are more considerate in an age when scholars of different religious faiths (or no religious faith) work together.

  But don't let that confuse you. The year 19 BCE is the same as 19 BC, and not only did we write this book in the 21st century AD, but we also wrote it in the 21st century CE.
- We generally use the word *deities* to refer to gods and goddesses together. We may occasionally use "gods" to mean "gods and goddesses."
- We've written this book in English, but most myths weren't told originally in English. We've often had to choose among different but equally okay ways of rendering human or divine names into English. Was the hero of the Trojan War called Achilles or Akhilleus? Was the founder of Taoism named Lao Tse or Lao Tzu? We've tried to make good decisions, but don't be surprised if you see some of the names spelled very differently in other books.

Foolish Assumptions

Dear reader, we make a few assumptions about you:

- You may have encountered some myths (Americans often learn about Greek mythology in school), but you'd like to know more about those myths and mythology in general.
- You may know a lot of myths from a particular culture — perhaps you are a fan of Japanese Manga — but would like to widen your knowledge of mythology to include other cultures.
- You're reading this book because you don't really know what mythology is, or what myths are, and you'd like to know.

Icons Used in This Book

Along the way, we've marked some information with these three icons.

Remember icons point out the information that's especially important to know. We also use this icon to indicate places where we tie bits of mythological theory with myths, pointing out what kind of myth you're looking at.

The Tip icon highlights suggestions or explanations that may help you better understand a complicated story or topic.

This icon identifies historical or scholarly information — things the professionals who study this stuff care about. This info isn't essential to the topic at hand, so the book makes sense even if you skip over all these icons. But it may be more fun if you don't.

Beyond the Book

In addition to what you're reading right now, this book comes with a free access-anywhere Cheat Sheet that includes tips to help you keep mythology at your fingertips. To get this Cheat Sheet, simply go to `www.dummies.com` and type "*Mythology For Dummies* Cheat Sheet" in the Search box.

Where to Go from Here

You can start reading this book at any point in any chapter! If you want more than we can offer in this For Dummies book, we've tried to reference the original sources for mythology, or the cultures and histories behind them, as we go along.

If you are a fan of the Percy Jackson novels, you could check out Chapters 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, and 8. Fans of Japanese Manga will enjoy Chapter 23. Fans of Marvel's Thor and Loki will enjoy Chapters 12 and 13. If your family traces its roots to Africa, Chapter 16, 18, and 19 might be interesting. If you are wondering why so many kids today are named "Finn" or "Maeve," check out Chapter 15. Fans of Disney's *Aladdin* will want to read Chapter 20.

1 Mythology Basics and Why the Stories Endure

IN THIS PART . . .

Define *myth* and make connections between myth, religion, and history.

See how myths survive, even in the face of science and even when they're based on a religion that no one practices anymore.

IN THIS CHAPTER

- Seeing what makes a myth and how myths are shared
- Examining common mythical themes and ideas about them
- Introducing common mythical characters
- Looking at famous American myths

Chapter 1
The Truth About Myths

Mythology is a way of understanding the world, and it's just as important and as "true" as the scientific or historical ways. In fact, science, history, and other logical ways of thinking simply fail to describe some very important things — things that folks care about. But myths can do the job.

REMEMBER

We take myths very seriously. Now, we're not saying that myths aren't funny; many myths are really funny, and they're supposed to be. Neither are we saying that our entire discussion of myths is serious, because it isn't. But when we say something is a myth, we're *not* saying that it's false or wrong. In other words, we don't think that science and history belong on one "correct" side and mythology belongs on another "silly" side. (We're big fans of science and history, by the way!)

That's what we think: that myths are important and worth taking seriously. And anything worth taking seriously should be fun to think about as well.

In this chapter, we show you how to spot a myth, what makes a story a myth, and the overlap among myths, legends, and folktales. We also explain how myths from long ago continue to survive today, the different kinds of myths, and what scholars and students of myth think these stories mean.

REMEMBER

We offer explanation wherever we can, but if you like quick, unambiguous answers, mythology is probably going to make you cranky. Myths exist, you see, to answer those human questions that don't have quick, unambiguous answers.

How to Spot a Myth a Mile Away

A myth is a story. The Greek word *mythos* means "story," and sometimes it means "thing you say that gets folks to act in a certain way." That's the basic concept. But, of course, not just any old story can be a myth. Amy (one of the authors of this book) was served a whole pig's head for dinner in Thailand; this story is a good one and worth telling, but it isn't a *myth.* Chris (the other author of this book) once got shot at by some people in the woods — another good story, but not up to the standards of mythology.

Experts love to argue about difficult, hard-to-define subjects, and mythology has been a popular topic for argument for the last two centuries. Scholars argue about what's a "true" myth as opposed to some other kind. Some mythology snobs insist, however, that no one confuse myths with other similar types of stories, such as legends, sagas, and folktales. (We define all four in the following sections.) But there is not a bright, obvious line between myth, folktale, legend, and factual historical accounts. (See "Different Types of Myths: Historical and Fictional American Legends.")

TIP

Most stories known as myths have elements of legend or folktale in them and vice versa. These terms are useful in helping decide what's a myth and what isn't, but you shouldn't get too hung up on them.

Specifics of mythological proportions

You may know a myth when you see it, but you still need some kind of definition before you can get down to the business of fully appreciating myths. *Myths* can be stories about gods, goddesses, and supernatural events and supernatural beings, and humans' relationships with them; they can also be tales from "history" (whether factual or fictional). What's common to all myths is that they explain truths or values and stories that help groups of people (such as a specific nationalities) identify themselves, understand their world, and define their values. Myths help validate the social order, such as hereditary kingships or social class structures. They also can provide a "history" of a kingdom that makes the existence and growth of a kingdom or nation seem inevitable.

REMEMBER

Because myths are often about humans and the gods, they're also often about religion. Every myth in this book was or still is part of a religion people practiced seriously.

The word *myth* has come to mean "untrue" in some contexts; people say something is "just a myth" if no factual basis exists for it. But myths do have their own truths. They provide people with a view of the world and a set of values that can

be as important as any scientifically verifiable fact. (For some examples, see Chapter 3.)

Legends and Sagas

Legends are similar to myths (which we describe in the preceding section), but they're based on history. It doesn't have to have much of a historical basis; lots of legends hardly jibe with the historical versions at all. A legend or *saga* (a long story about a series of adventures), however, does have to include something that may actually have happened. For example, the story of King Arthur is a legend because an actual man (probably) served as the basis for the King Arthur people know of today.

But there is not a clear-cut line. If a legend gets told and re-told because it helps a community, nation, or culture understand itself, its values, and where it comes from, it certainly qualifies as a myth.

Folktales

A *folktale* is a traditional tale that's primarily a form of entertainment; in some cases it's used to instruct. Folktales involve adventures, heroes, and magical happenings, but they don't usually try to explain human relationships with the divine. Like legends, folktales can get promoted to myths depending on how it serves the needs and imaginations of the people who pass it on.

Fairy tales look like myths and folktales, but they're a little different. Fairy tales came out of the Romantic movement of the 19th century, when people such as the Brothers Grimm collected stories from local people and wrote them up in romanticized versions. The *Romantic movement* was a trend in art and literature, in the 1700s and 1800s, that re-emphasized depictions of nature and human emotions.

If a Tree Falls in the Forest and No One Writes It Down, Is It Still a Myth?

People haven't always had access to big books with titles like "Greek Mythology" or "World Mythology" that they could read to get mythological information. But these myths nevertheless have moved down through the ages through the spoken word and through art. After writing was invented, people preserved the myths on paper. What could be more interesting — for authors in antiquity or even yesterday — than writing stories from myths?

The oral tradition

Myths are stories, and stories get told. Stories that are passed down from one generation to the next are stories told in the *oral tradition.* In places and times where people don't use written language, oral tradition is one of only two ways of preserving knowledge from one generation to the next; the other is art, which we cover in the following section.

REMEMBER

Oral tradition is the most traditional way for myths to start, to spread, and to develop. Because each generation that tells a myth has its own unique needs and experiences, myths tend to evolve over time and to exist in different versions.

In cultures with oral traditions, people tend to have better memories. Societies with oral traditions often turn stories into poems or songs, which are easier to remember and to repeat word for word. In cultures that write down their material, people don't need particularly good memories because they have books, sticky notes, smartphones, and other ways of reminding themselves of things that they otherwise may forget.

TIP

Think of the oral tradition as the material that passes from person to person via email, text message, or social media. Stories can spread across the world from computer user to computer user, changing slightly all the while. Some of these tales may become the myths of the 21st century.

Art

Art is another way myths can survive from generation to generation It can survive long after the people who made it have died, enabling archaeologists to uncover, restore, and interpret it. Art that helps preserve myths doesn't have to be fancy or sophisticated. Ordinary household objects often feature decorations that can tell modern archaeologists a lot about a society.

Literature

The poetry of Homer, a great source for Greek mythology, began life as an oral tradition of songs that singers would perform publicly. (Find more about that method in the earlier section "The oral tradition.") Eventually, of course, people put those myths in writing. This transfer is how myth becomes literature and why people learn about myths from literature.

Myths can serve as the inspiration for other kinds of literature. *Greek tragedies,* written texts intended to be performed as plays, often take their plots from Greek mythology; see Chapter 8. William Shakespeare used mythological themes for

many of his plays, borrowing from the mythology of the Mediterranean world and from northern European myths. For example, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is set at the court of the Greek hero Theseus during his marriage to the Amazon queen Hippolyta (read about him in Chapter 7). *Romeo and Juliet* is based on the story of Pyramus and Thisbe in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (Chapter 13).

More recently, there have been a number of best-selling re-tellings of ancient myths, like Madeline Miller's novels *Song of Achilles* and *Circe*, Rick Riordan's *Percy Jackson* books, Neil Gaiman's *American Gods,* Derek Walcott's *Omeros*, and many of the characters in the Marvel Cinematic Universe.

People have sought out oral traditions to record in writing for the purpose of study. So anthropologists may visit the indigenous people of Brazil or the people who live in the Sea Island community in South Carolina to listen to their stories and write them down. This written documentation helps preserve a culture and can provide insight into how myths evolve.

Comparative Mythology 101

Myths are tricky. Myths from around the world, from long ago and from recent times, often seem similar. Most myths appear to fall into certain categories, regardless of whether different cultures had much to do with each other. The following sections help explain what's up with that.

Theories about mythology

Anytime scholars find several factors that appear to follow a pattern, they try to find the rules that govern the pattern. During the 20th century, several scholars tried to explain what myths were all about and answer this age-old question: What's the purpose of all these stories? Because that truly is an unanswerable question, they devised several different theories, which gradually were incorporated into the fields of psychology, comparative literature, and anthropology.

Here's a quick summary of some of the more important theories about myths:

- Myths define social customs and beliefs.
- Myths are the same as ritual.
- Myths are *allegories,* similar to *parables* like those in the Christian Bible. They use symbolism to describe general human experiences through fun, specific, and memorable stories.

- Myths explain natural phenomena.
- Myths explain psychological phenomena such as love, sex, and anger toward one's parents. (Sigmund Freud bought into this theory big-time.)
- Myths contain *archetypes* (basic patterns of events) that reveal the *collective unconscious* of the human race, that is, stuff we think about all the time without really noticing that we're thinking about it. (Carl Jung believed this theory.)
- Myths are a way of communicating and helping people work together, or they're a way for people to talk about things that cause anxiety. If you know the story of *The City Mouse and the Country Mouse*, you know that life in the countryside versus life in the city is something that divides people's experiences and can be hard to work around. The tension between the value of sticking with your family and the need to marry outside of your family is another example of this kind of conflict. This is the basis of the approach called *structuralism*, which was based on the work of an anthropologist named Claude Levi-Strauss (no relation to the blue-jean pioneer).

No one of these approaches explains each and every myth. But taken together, they can make thinking about myths more fun.

Major types of myths

One reason so many scholars have tried pinning down the definition of myths is that myths can be similar across cultures, even in distant cultures. For example, Greece and Japan have stories about men who visit the underworld to retrieve their dead wives. The coincidence is freaky, as if some universal knowledge resides in human memory from the days when all people lived in caves. Here are some types that show up a lot all over the place:

- **Creation myths:** Everybody wants to know where the world and its creatures came from. Generally, the world emerges from *primordial darkness* (the darkness before history and all human experience), often in the shape of an egg, through the work of a creator deity.
- **Cosmogeny:** Many myths describe the way the world, the heavens, the sea, and the underworld are put together and how the sun and moon travel around them.
- **The origin of humanity:** Humans had to come from somewhere, and many mythologies describe their origin. They're often the pet creation of a deity dabbling in mud.

- **Flood stories:** Many mythologies have a story about gods who were unhappy with their first version of humans and destroyed the world with floods to get a clean start. Usually one man and one woman survive.
- **The introduction of disease and death:** Myths often describe the first humans as living in a paradise that's messed up when someone introduces unhappiness. The Greek story of Pandora's box is one of the best-known myths (see Chapter 3).
- **Afterlife:** Many people think that the soul continues to exist after the body dies; myths explain what happens to the soul.
- **The presence of supernatural beings:** Every body of mythology features deities and other supernatural entities. Individual deities often are in charge of particular aspects of the world or human life. Some supernatural beings are good, and some are evil; humans and the good gods fight the evil ones.
- **The end of the world:** Although the world has already ended at least once in most mythologies (usually through a great flood), some myths also have a plan for how it will end in the future.
- **The dawn of civilization:** Humans had to learn to live like people, not animals, and often the gods helped them. A common story tells of the theft of fire by a deity who brings it to humans.
- **Foundation myths:** People who founded empires liked to believe that historical reasons helped explain why vanquishing their enemies and building a city in a certain place was inevitable. A myth can help explain these reasons as well as why the people who lived there before don't deserve to live there anymore.

REMEMBER

One reason myths recur is that people have always moved around and talked with one another. People carried myths to one another just as they brought trade goods or disease. For example, many North American Nations have flood stories as part of their mythologies. Some of the first Europeans they encountered were Christian missionaries, who told them Christian stories including, no doubt, the biblical story of Noah and the flood.

The details of these stories are significant and have had far-reaching consequences. For example, many people have used myths to justify male domination of women (think of Eve emerging from Adam's rib in the Bible — he was there first). Myths also have been used to justify the oppression of one social group by another, and it's still happening today.

A Who's Who of Mythological Players

Myths have a fairly standard cast of characters. They always include divine beings, called deities or gods. Also present are humans who interact with gods; some of the extra special humans get to be heroes. Magical animals and tricksters, who live to stir things up, complete the list of players.

Deities

All bodies of myth have supernatural entities that hold power over the world and the people in it. These entities often are called gods and goddesses — the word *deity* is a neutral term that means god or goddess. Some cultures have many deities, and some have only one. Generally a culture has at least one creator deity and several other divine beings who divide up jobs such as driving the sun and moon, herding the dead, making crops grow, and so on. With this division of labor, people automatically knew which deity to ask for help; for example, a woman seeking help in childbirth knew not to waste her time praying to the rain god.

The supernatural world isn't home only to benevolent deities; negative beings *(antigods)* also live there and walk the earth with humans. Myths contain stories of devils, demons, dragons, monsters, and giants; these creatures fight both the gods and humans. In Zoroastrian religion and mythology, for example, there is the top-god, Ahura-Mazda, and the anti-god, the enemy, Ahriman (we talk about this in Chapter 20).

Heroes

Many myths feature *heroes,* who perform amazing feats of daring, strength, or cleverness. Some heroes are human, some are gods, and some are half-and-half. One feature common of mythological heroes is that their definitive characteristics are evident from childhood.

Culture heroes appear in myths bringing specific benefits to humans; for example, Prometheus was a culture hero to the ancient Greeks because he gave humans fire. See Chapter 6 for more on about this ancient Greek. In the mythology of indigenous people of the Americas, the man who discovered tobacco on the spot where he'd (earlier) discovered sex was doubly a culture hero. Chapter 25 has the complete lowdown.

Other heroes serve as models of human accomplishment; for example, the Greek hero Heracles (also known as Hercules) is the biggest, strongest, most heroic guy ever. You can read more about him in Chapter 6. Heroes often play a role in the foundation myths we discuss in the earlier section "Major types of myths."

Tricksters

Myths are full of trickster characters. Tricksters are popular mythical characters in myths from all cultures. Some of these tricksters are helpful to people by outwitting their enemies and bringing them gifts such as fire. The Greek trickster-hero Prometheus is like this (See Chapter 3). Others aren't so nice; Loki in Norse myths is sometimes downright evil. (See Chapter 12 for more about him.) The character Odysseus from Greek mythology (Chapter 7) tricks others for his own benefit. In the mythology of the indigenous peoples of the Americas, the trickster characters are often animals that seem humanlike. Examples include the Coyote in the Southwest, the Mink in the Pacific Northwest, and Wisakedjak, a rabbit trickster hero known to Eastern tribes. (See Chapter 25.) African mythology has lots of cunning characters: rabbits, deer, and humans. (See Chapter 16.)

Tricksters subvert the social order and break the rules, stirring things up either to beat their enemies, save their own lives, or help other animals or humans.

The Europeans knew the Native American trickster-hero Wisakedjak as Whiskey Jack, who may well be the mythological ancestor to Br'er Rabbit, a figure in African American folklore (and mythology!). We talk about this mischievous bunny later in this chapter.

Different Types of Myths: Historical and Fictional American Legends

Some myths are firmly rooted in historical fact, and others are entirely made up. And they don't have to be super ancient. The easiest way to see the difference is to look at two American myths. One of these myths is based on a historical character and his historical actions. And another one is entirely fictional but an important myth nevertheless.

Johnny Appleseed, a cultural hero

Johnny Appleseed is a figure of mythology. He's also 100 percent historically factual. His real name was John Chapman, and he was a professional nurseryman (that is, he grew plants and sold them). He collected apple seeds from cider-making operations in Pennsylvania and then moved westward, planting a series of orchards between the Allegheny Mountains and Ohio. He gave away seeds to pioneers, but he also made a tidy profit off his enterprise.

But none of these historical facts is nearly as important as the mythological "truth" of Johnny Appleseed. As a figure of myth, he represents the pioneering spirit of the early history of the United States as people moved west to settle in different lands. He represents the conquest of the wilderness as settlers turned wild forests into farms. And he represents a set of values that Americans like to associate with the early builders of the nation: piety, charity, closeness to the earth, and independence.

Few folks would be particularly interested in the history of a dealer in agricultural products, but many people in the United States grow up knowing about Johnny Appleseed, the culture hero who helped the country grow.

Br'er Rabbit, American trickster

The myth of Br'er Rabbit is entirely fictional. Br'er (that is, "Brother") Rabbit (see Figure 1-1) and his tricks and adventures appeared in an Atlanta newspaper in 1879. This work told the first of a number of stories about the tricky rabbit who outsmarts Mr. Fox, Mrs. Cow, and others again and again.

FIGURE 1-1: Br'er Rabbit.

These stories, which are similar to and may be based on various African myths, were part of the folklore of the American Southeast before the Civil War and during the following period of Reconstruction. All segments of the population, particularly African American communities, enjoyed them. The Br'er Rabbit tales can be called myths because they convey important truths. For enslaved and formerly enslaved peoples, Br'er Rabbit represented a hero who won, again and again, despite being in the power of others.

When Joel Chandler Harris brought versions of these stories to the attention of a wider American audience, Br'er Rabbit became a shared American myth. Americans like to root for underdogs and to believe that a hero can use his wits and his initiative to overcome obstacles. Br'er Rabbit, the character, seems to have evolved from the stories of the indigenous peoples of the Americas, involving the tricky Wisakedjak (see Chapter 25), and stories from Central Africa involving the trickster named Uhlakayana (see Chapter 16). He represents truths that are important to Americans' ideas about themselves. He might be the (multicultural) mythological ancestor to Bugs Bunny.

IN THIS CHAPTER

- Watching a myth evolve
- Noticing mythological elements all around you
- Spotting mythology in the night sky
- Finding mythology in all types of art and turning old myths into today's entertainment

Chapter 2

Ancient Myths in Modern Culture: The Legacy

Myths describe important truths by using symbols. The truths are things that ordinary language doesn't describe well: the relationship between humans and the divine, the nature of love, what happens after you die, and so on. The symbols are things from everyday life: people, parents and their children, gifts, storms, animals, plants.

Many myths have managed to survive for thousands of years, long after the death of the civilization that created them. Even today, in a world that supposedly is rational and scientific, myths are everywhere, and they're still very powerful. People want heroes; they want stories that explain how the world works.

This chapter explores some of the ways these myths are still around today. We show you how myths evolve and endure by tracing one myth from its roots in ancient Greece through ancient centuries, through the Renaissance, and up to the

modern age. And we'll look at how mythological characters lend names to things all around us, and how myths lend storylines to the films and TV series that we watch today.

In short, this chapter illustrates shows you why mythology is worth knowing.

Remaking Myth: Troilus's Journey from Obscurity to Fame

Myths can stick around for thousands of years, serving different people's needs at different times and changing all the while.

REMEMBER

Myths don't have one "true" version; stories and characters can be different things to different people while still retaining their mythical stature.

The long, long journey of the myth of Troilus, Prince of Troy, is a great example of a myth that has survived and changed through the ages. Troilus started out as a very minor character in Homer's *Iliad,* but as we explain in the following sections, his name and story served not only Homer and other Greeks and Romans but also the French, Italian, and English writers of the Middle Ages. Through time and the work of different authors who took an interest in him, he turned into a major Shakespearean hero, and at least one of the myth's supporting characters came along for the ride.

The pathetic Trojan prince

Troilus doesn't start in the mythological Big League. He first shows up in Homer's poem, the *Iliad,* which tells the story of part of the Trojan War. The full details of this story appear in Chapter 7, but Troilus in Homer is so insignificant that we don't even mention him there! Troilus is one of the (many, many) sons of Priam, King of Troy. He appears very briefly in the *Iliad* mostly as a literary device: Achilles kills him right away, which sets up Achilles as the destroyer of Troy and foreshadows his murder of Hector, Troilus's more important older brother.

Later Greek and Roman writers added to Troilus's story; they either made up new parts of it or wrote down other preexisting versions of the myth that differed from what Homer wrote. In these versions, a prophecy says that if Troilus reaches the

age of 20, then the Greeks will never defeat Troy. But Achilles kills Troilus in a temple of the god Apollo. This death turns him into a kind of "savior" of Troy, except that he doesn't save the city (you know, because he dies).

Early pulp romance: Medieval authors rediscover Troilus

The journey of Troilus's myth jumps about 1,500 years into the future from Homer and company to the 12th century CE. During the High Middle Ages, a French writer named Benoît de Sainte-Maure picked up the story of Troilus and turned it into a romance: the *Roman de Troie* ("The Romance of Troy"). De Sainte-Maure portrayed Troilus as an innocent young man, and he also gave the young Trojan hero a girlfriend: Briseida. (In Homer, Briseis is Achilles's girlfriend; de Sainte-Maure thought it'd be nice to give her to Troilus instead with a slight name change.)

De Sainte-Maure's story emphasizes the tragedy of a lover betrayed. Troilus and Briseida are deeply in love and make all sorts of promises to each other. But then the Greeks capture Briseida, and she falls in love with the Greek hero Diomedes. Poor Troilus, his heart broken, is killed by Achilles. So Troilus serves to tell a moving story of romantic love and tragic innocence.

On to Italy and England

Giovanni Boccaccio, a medieval Italian writer, retold the story of Troilus around 1338 CE in his work *Il Filostrato* ("The Guy Betrayed by Love") and changed the girlfriend's name to Cressida — presumably to help keep her straight from Achilles's woman, Briseis. The English poet Geoffrey Chaucer told it again a few years later as *Troilus and Criseyde.* Both of these writers also emphasized the romantic tragedy of the story.

William Shakespeare, in 1601 or 1602 CE, wrote the most famous version of the story, in his *Tragedie of Troylus and Cressida.* For the most part, Shakespeare followed de Sainte-Maure (see the preceding section), Boccaccio, and Chaucer in his plot, but he used the story for a different purpose: to show how "heroic" characters can act like completely despicable jerks. He wrote this play during a time when politics in England were somewhat chaotic, and he used this old, old myth of Troilus (originally from the 8th century BCE) to say something important about politics in the world of the 17th century CE. However, people today still find Shakespeare's play to be enlightening and meaningful.

Troilus and Cressida live on

Troilus and Cressida persist today in more everyday ways as well. For example, in the 1990s, Toyota made a car called the Cressida (though the wisdom of this name may be questionable given that Cressida is famous for betraying her lover and leaving him to die). In 1986, when the Voyager II spaceship flew by Uranus and discovered a new moon orbiting that planet, this new heavenly body — only 67 kilometers in diameter — got the name Cressida.

Popping up in Pop Culture

Myths are stories about important things — life, death, immortality, power, love, nature — so the names in myths are powerful. These names, even if they're from very ancient and very foreign myths, still evoke emotions. Myths are symbols, and the folks who sell stuff (cars, trinkets, books, movies) give them names that, they hope, will symbolize things you like.

Driving down the street, going on vacation — you can't avoid the impact of myths. They're everywhere! That's partly because companies market to emotions and partly because myths are just cool and people like to buy stuff with mythical names.

Driving it all home

If your old Toyota Cressida betrays you like its mythical namesake (see the earlier section "Troilus and Cressida live on"), perhaps driving a Toyota Avalon will make you feel like King Arthur himself. And a trip to the beach with the kids may feel like it takes 20 years, like the journey of Odysseus, but unlike that Greek hero in his ship, you'll have lots of cup holders in a Honda Odyssey.

Wearing it today

Any tourist to the American Southwest will have no trouble coming home with a dozen T-shirts featuring Kokopelli, the flute-playing trickster from the mythology of the indigenous peoples of North America (for more on him, check out Chapter 25). He symbolizes the ancient art and culture of the region and a spirit of lively independence from the straight-and-narrow, and he's become an easily recognized symbol of that part of the country in general.

People all over the place wear necklaces with pendants in the shape of an *ankh* (like a cross but with an oval top). This symbol comes from the mythology of Egypt and has symbolized (for many thousands of years, back into deep antiquity) life and happiness. The famous King Tut incorporated it into his name, which in its fullest form is TutANKHamun. The ankh might be a symbol of both male and female essences as well. The ankh is especially popular as a symbol of the Christian Coptic Church. It's also a modern symbol of Africa and its contributions to world culture (contributions that much of the world spent a lot of time and energy ignoring or disparaging).

Looking up in the Sky . . . It's a Bird . . . It's a Plane . . . No, It's a Myth!

The sky is chock-full of myths. People looked for gods and heroes in the patterns of stars, and they found them!

The number of myths in space is astronomical

Even rational, scientific astronomers of the 21st century see myths in the night sky in the form of constellations. Pegasus, the winged horse that was born from the blood of the monstrous Medusa, is up there, as is the half-man, half-horse Centaur. During the winter in the Northern Hemisphere, Orion the Hunter is one of the most obvious constellations — easy to find because of his bright belt of three stars. In Greek mythology, Orion died after being stung by a scorpion, but he's safe in the sky because he sets in the west just as Scorpio rises in the east. Folks in the Southern Hemisphere can see the Argo, the ship that Jason and the Argonauts sailed to Colchis to steal the Golden Fleece. (For more on Jason, see Chapter 6.)

All the planets are named after Greek and Roman gods (including Earth, who was Gaia to the Greeks): Mercury, the messenger; Venus, the goddess of love; Mars, the war-god; Jupiter, the king; Saturn, the father of the gods; Neptune, god of the sea; and Uranus, the ancient sky-god. And you can take away Pluto's planet status, but it's still named after the god of the dead, so far away. (Chapters 3 and 9 have more on these gods.)

THE STARS AREN'T JUST GREEK

One easy-to-find constellation (or, technically, "star cluster," because it doesn't actually make a picture) is the *Pleiades,* or the "Seven Sisters." The Greeks said these were the daughters of Atlas: Alcyone, Merope, Celaeno, Taygeta, Maia, Electra, and Asterope.

But the Greeks didn't have a monopoly on myths, of course, and they don't have a monopoly on constellations, either. The Egyptians knew these seven stars, too, and some scholars think that the seven chambers of the Great Pyramid intentionally echo those seven stars. The Blackfoot tribe in North America knew this group of stars as the "six brothers." (One of the seven stars isn't very clear, which the Greeks noted as well.) The Blackfoot story tells of six boys who were too poor to wear nice buffalo robes, and when their friends laughed at them, they told everyone to get lost and moved up into the sky. In the southern islands of the Pacific, the Polynesians know these seven stars as *Mata-riki,* or the "Little Eyes."

NASA loves mythology, too

Because of all the mythological names already up there (see the preceding section), choosing mythological names for the NASA programs and machines that got humans to the moon made sense. The first part of the U.S. space program was Project Mercury, named after the messenger god of the Romans (see Chapter 9); this choice was to "send a message" to the Soviet Union that the United States was in the race. The Mercury capsules were launched with Atlas rocket boosters, named after the Titan who held up the sky (see Chapter 3).

Project Gemini was next, named after the twins Castor and Pollux, the brothers of Helen of Troy ("twins" in Latin is *gemini*), because the Gemini capsules held two astronauts. The Gemini astronauts rode into space atop Titan rockets. (The Titans are the gods/monsters that the Greek god Zeus defeats to become King of the Gods.) Finally, human beings made it to the moon with Project Apollo, named after the Greek god of light and knowledge; in the mentality of the Cold War, a U.S. victory in the "space race" represented "light" winning over communist "darkness." Apollo astronauts rode atop Saturn rockets. Saturn was the big daddy of the Titans.

Good Myths make for Good Art

When ancient people anywhere in the world painted anything or sculpted anything, they usually chose subjects from their own mythology. When people learned to write, they started by writing down their myths. But myths stick around, and

the myths of the ancient world keep showing up in art and literature right up to the present day.

Art without myth? Impossible!

The mythology of Greece and Rome has been painted and sculpted for 3,000 years, and not always by Greeks and Romans. After the fall of the Roman Empire in Western Europe, the old pagan myths took a vacation from art for a few centuries for two reasons:

- In the north, where Christianity was dominant, artists tended to focus on Christian themes and avoided non-Christian ones.
- In the south around the Mediterranean, where Islam had enjoyed its rapid rise, artists didn't do *figurative art* — that is, art that looked like people, animals, plants, or anything real — at all because the Qur'an (and the Hebrew and Christian Bibles, for that matter) forbade the making of "graven images." So Islamic artists focused on abstract decorations and *calligraphy* (incredibly fancy letters).

But then the Renaissance came to Europe. *Renaissance* means "rebirth," and in this case what was "reborn" was the knowledge of the ancient, pre-Christian Greek and Roman world. In the world of art, the Renaissance led artists to pay more attention to the natural world (as opposed to the world of the divine) and to include more Greek and Roman mythological content in their works.

So Michelangelo painted pagan prophets on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, right alongside prophets from the Christian Bible. This illustrates (literally) the fact that mythologies tend to pile up instead of replacing each other. Bernini sculpted David, a figure from Hebrew history and mythology, and Perseus from Greek mythology.

Myths are darn good stories

Myths make good foundations for books because myths are symbolic ways of telling the truth, and (better yet) they're *shared* symbols. This trait makes myths useful for writers, who need to relate their own, private ideas to important truths readers can recognize. So behind many, if not most, good books, readers can find a good myth (or two, or a dozen)!

Myths in English literature

In England, folks generally didn't know how to read ancient Greek until the 1700s. William Shakespeare used stuff from Greek myths in his plays in the 1600s, but he got his material from mostly Latin and Italian sources.

Between 1713 and 1720, Alexander Pope translated Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey* from Greek into English. This job made Pope really, really rich (he got £10,000 for this book, and that was in 1713 money!). It also made ordinary folks who knew only English aware of all the mythology contained in Homer's poetry.

In the 1800s, English poets and painters, particularly those known as *the Romantics,* produced a lot of art about mythological themes. Alfred, Lord Tennyson, was a particularly popular poet of the Victorian period, and his first published volume of poetry contained two mythological works: "The Lotus Eaters" was based on one of the adventures that the Greek hero Odysseus had on his journey home from Troy, and "The Lady of Shalott" is based on the mythology of Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table. One of Tennyson's most famous poems is "Ulysses," named after the Roman name of Odysseus. Its last words — ". . . to strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield" — are quoted every spring in thousands of graduation speeches.

Modern mythical literature

In the 20th century, artists were just as likely to use stories from mythology, but often with some sort of twist. Bernard Shaw wrote a play called *Pygmalion* in 1913 that was based on the myth of the woman-hating artist who made a sculpture of a woman and then fell in love with his own creation. You can read about the source material in Chapter 11. But in Shaw's play — which was later turned into the musical *My Fair Lady* — the artist becomes a professor of *phonetics* (he studied the sounds that make up language) who takes a woman from the lower classes, teaches her to speak the speech of the upper classes, and then falls in love with her.

After the First World War, writers were more likely to put an ironic twist on mythological themes. So W. H. Auden's poem "The Shield of Achilles" contrasts the ethics of war in Homer's poetry with the horrors of war in the 20th century. And Arthur Miller's play *Death of a Salesman* uses Greek tragedies, which were almost all about mythological themes, as its model. However, it has a very unheroic main character, a traveling salesman, as its "tragic hero."

Maurice Sendak's book *Where the Wild Things Are* (Harper Collins) is essentially Homer's *Odyssey* in a very short form: The hero is banished from normal life against his will; on his journey, he faces danger and overcomes it through force of character; he's offered a position of great honor in a faraway land; he chooses to return home, even if that means facing the problems he left there; and in the end, all is well. A good story for kids, and a good story for people for the last three millennia.

Myths show up in theaters and on the small screen

Myths are important, perhaps ultimately important. People know that some things that are true can't be described with scientific or theological language. Those truths have to come through symbolic stories. When people find stories that contain symbols that point to those important truths, they respond. And so the people who make movies, TV shows, and video games know that if they want to tell a good story, they should steal some ideas from the stories that have stood the test of time.

Movies, TV, and video and computer games are, across the globe, a $2.1 billion industry annually, based on data from 2019. This industry almost entirely depends on people who have read myths and thought about them.

Movies

Movies are a good place to go looking for myths. Walt Disney's 1937 classic *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs,* for example, seems very familiar to anyone who knows the Greek story of Persephone. Persephone was separated from her mother, the kind goddess Demeter, and kidnapped by the god of the underworld. Ultimately, she has to spend part of the year "dead" (married to the underworld god) and part of the year alive. Disney's story follows this pattern but makes the female characters (except for the heroine) bad and the male characters good. Snow White flees from her evil stepmother and comes to live with dwarves (who work underground). In the end, her mother "kills" her, but she's "awakened" by a passing prince. If you watch the movie closely, you can see Snow White actually falls into the underworld before meeting up with the dwarves!

George Lucas recognized the importance of mythological symbolism, which is why his first *Star Wars* film grossed $461 million dollars (and those were 1977 dollars!). We won't give away all the secrets; instead, we suggest you try this challenge (if you aren't one of the eight people in the world who haven't seen the original *Star Wars* film): Read the rest of this book and think about *Star Wars: A New Hope,* a story about a young man who leaves his family's farm to get involved in events of universal significance. Lucas read a book by Joseph Campbell called *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, about how certain mythological themes keep turning up in myths of all cultures. Lucas realized that if he used those same themes — young man meets mysterious stranger, goes on an adventure with some comic sidekicks, discovers that he is the "Chosen One," and defeats the evil emperor or sorcerer (or both) — the result was bound to be a hit. He was right!

The Hunger Games follows the storyline of the Greek myth of Theseus pretty closely (see Chapter 6), and the films of Hayao Miyazaki — *Spirited Away, Nausicaa and the Valley of the Winds, Howl's Moving Castle*, and others — draw on both Japanese and European mythology. (Nausicaa is the name of a princess in Homer's *Odyssey*, although that doesn't really seem to come into play in Miyazaki's film.)

Television shows

There have been a number of television series over the years that retell the story of Homer's *Odyssey* (see Chapter 7). Fantasy series like *Game of Thrones* draw heavily on mythological elements from various cultures, including dragons and mysterious dark forces that oppose the "forces of good." The series *The Boys* features a character named Queen Maeve, named after the figure from Irish mythology (see Chapter 15).

Video games

The world of video games changes rapidly, but when we're writing this, games like *Dota 2*, *Assassin's Creed*, *Age of Empires*, *Hades*, *God of War*, *Shadow of the Colossus*, and of course *Age of Empires: Age of Mythology* bring parts of myths, characters from myths, and even entire myths into the world of gameplay. The game *Sid Meier's Civilization IV* features Hunapú and Ixblanqué, the Hero Twins of Mayan mythology (see Chapter 17).

About those Marvelous Heroes

We'd be remiss if we didn't mention those superheroes from what started as Marvel Comics, and then became the Marvel Comic Universe, and is now the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU). Many of these MCU characters had their origins in the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s, but have been brought forward into television, films, and video games. Characters from the Black Panther, to Thor and Loki, to Gilgamesh (one of The Eternals) come straight out of the world's mythologies.

2 Thunder and Lightning: Greek Mythology

IN THIS PART . . .

See the creation of the universe according to the Greeks and family drama among the gods.

Meet the male Olympian gods, the ones who won the early wars and (Greeks thought) ruled the world and people's lives.

Admire the female Olympian Gods, who are just as powerful and just as potentially helpful (and potentially nasty) as their male counterparts.

Go on adventures with the Greek heroes, human children of the gods.

Follow the mythological Trojan War, which was the centerpiece of all Greek mythology. Take the long way home with Odysseus, the main character of the *Odyssey*.

Get the scoop on Greek tragedy, where Greeks in the city of Athens retold their own mythology to fit their innovative democratic politics.

IN THIS CHAPTER

- Creating the world, violently
- Watching to see which gods, the Titans or the Olympians, come out on top
- Making humans, making humans warm, and making humans miserable
- Mapping the ancient Greek landscape
- Waiting (and wading) out a worldwide flood

Chapter 3

Greek Creation Myths and Really Ancient Greek Gods

The ancient Greeks never cared much about keeping their collection of myths consistent. They let contradictory versions of stories live happily together. One feature of myth is that it isn't science. You don't have to get *the right* answer; it hinges on storytelling. One poet may say that a god created humans out of mud. Another poet may say we were originally made of gold. If both versions mean something to the listeners, they can both exist side-by-side.

One thing that is consistent across Greek myths about the world's creation is that the business wasn't pretty. All the nastiness that goes on between human beings

also went on between human beings and the gods, and between the gods themselves, according to the Greeks. It was all about getting, keeping, or getting back the upper hand.

In this chapter, we give you the short version of the creation of the world, according to the Greeks. We introduce you to the scary old gods who came first (before they got stomped down by their kids) and then follow the jockeying for power between different generations of gods, the story of how the younger gods created humans, and the many ways gods made early generations of humans suffer.

Considering Creation, Primordial Beings, and the First Generation of Gods

The most complete version of the Greek creation myths that survives is a poem called the *Theogony* ("Birth of the Gods") by a poet named Hesiod, who lived in the late eighth or early seventh century BCE (that is, the low-numbered 700s or high-numbered 600s BCE). Not much is known about Hesiod except that his dad lost all his money when his ship sank, and Hesiod's brother tried to rob him of his inheritance. These two facts may account for the tone of what you're about to read.

REMEMBER

The Greek creation myth we describe in this chapter — though a particularly good and complete one — is just one of many versions the Greeks told.

In the beginning, there's Chaos. Darkness covers the earth. Hesiod's creation story doesn't involve something being created from nothing; stuff (Chaos) is there, but it's shapeless, mixed-up, and dark. But then, the gods are born. Five divinities come into being (how is unclear) and begin to give shape to things, separating the muddle into specific places and times, and to set the stage for more creation. These divinities are

- Gaia (the mother Earth)
- Tartarus (the underworld). Eventually, Hades (part of a later generation of gods) takes over as the underworld-God. Tartarus sticks around as the very deepest part of the underworld.
- Erebus (the darkness that covers the underworld)
- Night (darkness that covers Earth)
- Eros (Love)

Night and Erebus get together and have some children:

- Hemera (Day)
- Phōs (Light)
- A cheery set of quintuplets: Doom, Death, Misery, Deceit, and Discord

Discord later gives birth to the following other forces: Murder, Slaughter, Battle, and Crime.

Earth holds the Sky up above itself. Or maybe we should say "herself," because Earth, called "Gaia," is female and the Sky, called "Uranus" (Earth's child) is male. Gaia and Uranus have some kids of their own, but their kids aren't forces like those created by Night and Erebus. The offspring of Mother Earth and Father Sky are monsters and gods.

The earliest versions of these stories come from the seventh century BCE. Life must have been pretty rough then, so creation myths that paint a pretty dark picture aren't surprising.

Managing Monstrous Kids and the Second Generation of Gods

The divinities Gaia and Uranus had a lot of kids. First, they had a bunch of monsters. Then, perhaps having worked out the kinks in the system, they produced some gods known as *Titans.*

The Titans are Gaia's and Uranus's most important children because they're the second-generation Greek gods.

Our children are real monsters!

Gaia's and Uranus's first three kids are monsters with 100 hands (*Hekatoncheires*) and 50 heads each.

The next three are the *Cyclopes*, giants with one eye in the middle of their foreheads. (Their name means "round-eyed.") They're as big as mountains and immensely strong (and not to be confused with another batch of Giants that show up later).

REMEMBER

A Cyclops named Polyphemus also appears in the *Odyssey.* In that poem, the Cyclopes are *not* these primordial beings, but the monstrous sons of the sea god Poseidon.

Meet the Titans, the second generation of gods

Uranus and Gaia give birth to many more children, but their most famous kids are the Titans. They too are big and strong. These six sons and six daughters are

- **Oceanus:** God of the Sea
- **Thetis:** Sister and wife of Oceanus
- **Hyperion:** God of the Sun
- **Theia:** Sister and wife of Hyperion
- **Themis:** An earth goddess
- **Rhea:** An earth goddess
- **Mnemosyne:** Goddess of Memory
- **Iapetus:** No notable responsibilities
- **Coeus:** No notable responsibilities
- **Phoebe:** No notable responsibilities
- **Crius:** No notable responsibilities
- **Cronos**: The brightest, strongest, and cleverest of all

These Titans are the generation before the better-known Olympian gods — Zeus and others — whom we discuss in the later section "Taking on the Third Generation of Gods: The Olympians."

TIP

The Thetis who is a Titan isn't the same Thetis who is the sea-goddess mother of the hero Achilles (see Chapter 7).

Gaia's sweet revenge and the prodigal son

Uranus hated all of the Titans (see the preceding section), and as each one was born, he shoved it back up into Gaia's body. Gaia didn't like that (they were still alive in there!), so she asked her other children, the Cyclopes and the Titans, to help her. One of her sons, the Titan Cronos, agreed to attack his own father for her. Gaia made a huge sickle out of flint and gave it to Cronos with some pretty explicit instructions.

When Uranus next came to have sex with Gaia, he met with a nasty surprise. Cronos (who was, remember, inside Gaia's womb) reached out with the sickle, cut off his father's genitals, and threw them into the sea. From the blood were born several more monsters: the Giants and the Furies. (See Chapter 5 for more on the Furies.) You can find the family tree of all the Greek gods, according to Hesiod, in Figure 3-1 (but with many, many cousins left out).

As Uranus's genitals fell into the water, the sea foamed up, and the foam produced Aphrodite, the goddess of love. Her name means "gift of the sea-foam." She floated around in the sea for a while and then came to shore on the island of Cyprus, which is why she's often called Cyprian Aphrodite. Because Aphrodite became the goddess of love, the circumstances of her birth — the result of a nasty bit of domestic violence — are ironic. (For more about Aphrodite, see Chapter 5.)

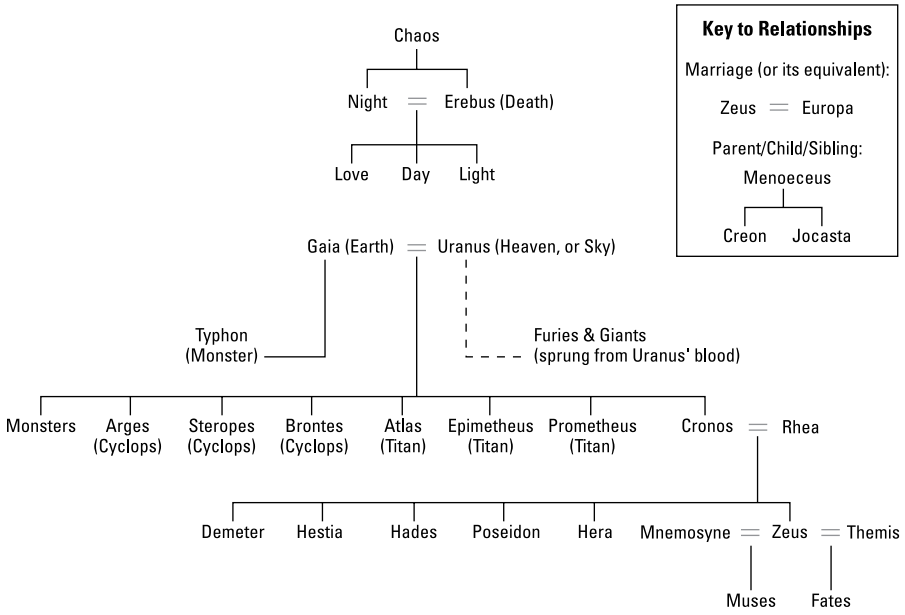

FIGURE 3-1: The main members of the family of the gods.

TECHNICAL STUFF

In the poet Hesiod's version of things, Eros is an ancient god, older than Aphrodite. But in subsequent Greek myths, Eros seems to be Aphrodite's *son*, a young man. And in another mythological paradox, some Greek myths say that Aphrodite is the daughter of the goddess Dione and the Titan Oceanus. This kind of inconsistency didn't bother the Greeks, so you shouldn't let it bother you.

TECHNICAL STUFF

Hesiod doesn't say so, but the marital spat between Gaia and Uranus is probably why, in other myths, the Titan Atlas, and not Earth herself, is the one who holds up the sky.

Mythology repeats itself: Cronos and Rhea turn into their parents

After Cronos castrated his father Uranus (see preceding section for more about this story), Cronos set himself up as king of heaven. He married his sister, the Titan Rhea, and they had a bunch of kids.

Like his father, Cronos didn't want all his kids to live. He'd heard a prophecy that one of his sons would overthrow him, and he had no intention of allowing that to happen. So every time Rhea had a baby, he swallowed it alive.

Rhea, like Gaia before her, wasn't at all happy to see her husband try to destroy all her children. So she asked for help from her parents, Gaia and Uranus. Gaia and Uranus had some experience in these matters (and apparently had gotten past their own marital difficulties), and they came up with a plan, which we cover in the following section.

Taking on the Third Generation of Gods: The OG Olympians

The third generation of gods were known as the Olympian Gods because they eventually made their home on Mount Olympus. These gods are probably more familiar because many ancient stories and modern pop culture feature the Olympians. The Olympian generation of gods consists of Rhea and Cronos's children, whom Cronos swallowed (see the preceding section).

As the Greeks saw it, most of the Greek gods lived on Mount Olympus. This mountain still exists in northern Greece; the gods probably picked it because it's very tall and, therefore, close to heaven. Also, its top is often shrouded in clouds, making it mysterious.

When Rhea had her sixth child, Zeus, she smuggled him away to the island of Crete and gave her husband a baby-sized rock wrapped in a blanket instead. Cronos obviously didn't know much about babies, because he swallowed the stone and never gave it another thought.

Zeus grew up safely on Crete. The Nymphs gave him milk from a magical goat named Amalthea, and the *Curetes,* minor gods who had the job of protecting him,

banged their spears against their swords every time baby Zeus cried. That way, Cronos never heard him. (See Chapter 5 for more about Nymphs.)

As Zeus grew, he had no particular reason to love his dad, so he got together with his grandmother, Gaia, and they made Cronos vomit up the children he'd eaten. The first thing Cronos coughed out was the stone Rhea had given him instead of Zeus, and at that moment he knew he'd been tricked. The other five babies (the first Olympian gods) had grown up in his belly, and they emerged as full-fledged deities:

- **Hera:** Goddess of marriage
- **Poseidon:** God of the sea
- **Hades:** God of the underworld
- **Hestia:** Goddess of the hearth
- **Demeter:** Goddess of crops and the harvest

There would ultimately be 12 Olympian Gods, as these gods had their own children.

The Olympians clash with the Titans

During his fight with his father, Zeus cut off Cronos' genitals — like father like son! — which dropped into the sea just as Uranus's privates had. (Check out the earlier section "Gaia's sweet revenge and the prodigal son" for more on that story.)

After castrating his father Cronos, Zeus bound the Titans in *Tartarus,* the underworld. He sentenced Atlas, one of the Titans, to hold up the sky on his shoulders.

Gaia had one more baby, the monster Typhon. Typhon had 100 heads and was covered with flame. But by now Zeus had taken control of thunder and lightning, and he shot down Typhon with his thunderbolt. Typhon's hopes of terrorizing the universe were ended, but he still needed a job, so he moved to Sicily, where he supplied the volcanic magma for Mount Etna.

After this event, the Giants (the ones born when Cronos cut off Uranus's testicles) rebelled against Zeus's control. Zeus and his siblings, aided by the hero Heracles (see Chapter 6 for details on this hunky brute), beat the Giants and sent them down to the underworld. Now Zeus and his brothers and sisters were the ultimate rulers of heaven and earth.

The fourth generation (more Olympians)

Along with the Olympians Zeus, Hera, Poseidon, and Demeter — the third generation of gods — there are some very important fourth-generation gods, who are children of the third generation. This next generation includes:

- Athena
- Apollo
- Artemis
- Ares
- Aphrodite
- Hephaestus
- Hestia

We discuss these gods and goddesses and their roles in Chapter 4 and Chapter 5.

REMEMBER

All together, the third and fourth generations of gods are the "12 Olympians" (though some ancients omit Hestia and include Dionysus instead).

Perusing the Creation of People

The most common Greek story of the creation of humans (recounted by the author Pausanias) says that the Titan Prometheus and his brother Epimetheus got the job of creating all the creatures on the earth. The Greeks said that Prometheus had made humans in the image of the gods. The main difference between animals and humans was that animals turned their faces down to look at the ground while humans walked upright and turned their faces up toward the sky.

TECHNICAL STUFF

Prometheus is wise; his name means "forethought." Epimetheus, on the other hand, is scatterbrained; his name means "afterthought" or "hindsight."

Prometheus made creatures out of mud. Epimetheus gave them gifts of skills, abilities, and protection — he gave the birds wings, the lions and tigers claws and teeth, the turtles and snails hard shells, and so on. But silly Epimetheus didn't plan ahead, so he ran out of gifts just before Prometheus created humans. That meant Prometheus had to find a special gift for the humans on his own. That gift was the power to use fire. This gift stirred up trouble with Zeus.

Playing with fire

When the race of humans was young, the gods tried to keep the use of fire a secret. Zeus's ultimate weapon was, after all, the fire of lightning, and he didn't want humans to get that power. Prometheus decided to give his pet creation a technological boost by delivering the tool of fire into human hands. So he stole it. He went up to heaven, lit his torch in the sun, hid the burning torch in a stalk of giant fennel, and smuggled it down to earth.

Fire made humans more than a match for other animals — they could cook their food, warm their homes, make metal tools and weapons, and coin money. It was the ultimate tool for creating civilization. But wow was Zeus mad when he found out!

Giant fennel grows all over the Mediterranean world, like a weed. The plant has a big hollow, central stalk — perfect for a Titan to hide fire inside! The Greek word for the plant is *narthex.* In the technical vocabulary of the parts of a medieval cathedral, the *narthex* is the front porch and foyer. This terminology may or may not come from the Myth of Prometheus.

The love-hate triangle: Prometheus, people, and Zeus

Zeus was angry about Prometheus giving humans fire (see the preceding section), but Prometheus had another trick in the folds of his *chlamys* (a short Greek tunic). Prometheus had arranged things so that whenever humans sacrificed animals to the gods, the humans would get to keep and eat the best parts, and the gods would get the leftovers. Prometheus had cut up an ox and divided it into two parts. He put the meat inside the skin and piled the guts on top of it, and then he took the bones and wrapped them in the delectable fat, and asked Zeus to pick the pile he wanted. Zeus picked the fat (fat was valuable in those days . . . lots of calories to keep you warm) and the humans kept the meat. Zeus was aggravated.

However, when people made a sacrifice from then on, they burned the bones and fat for the gods and kept the edible parts. This approach was convenient because humans got to have a good barbeque even as they honored the gods — a better deal for folks who had a hard enough time feeding themselves, much less burning up whole animals just for the gods.

The Greeks honored their gods with sacrifices, sometimes pouring wine onto the ground (a *libation*) or killing an animal and burning it. Generally, killing an animal for the gods resulted in a fun, public barbeque celebrating the gift of Prometheus, that they got to eat the good parts of the sacrificial animal. If a community thought

it was *really in trouble* with the gods, it could perform a sacrifice where it burned up the whole animal with no fun barbeque. This occasion was called a *holocaust* ("all-burned-up").

After stealing fire and then teaching humans tricky sacrifice rituals, Prometheus had really crossed the line, in the eyes of Zeus. He captured Prometheus, dragged him to the Caucasus Mountains, and chained him to a rock. Every day an eagle came and tore out Prometheus's liver, which evidently grew back every night.

After Prometheus told Zeus the secret of a whose-child-will-overthrow-me prophecy, (see Chapter 5), Zeus arranged to set Prometheus free and increase the reputation of one of Zeus's favorite sons, Heracles. When Heracles was wandering the earth — he traveled a great deal on his way to various tasks during his life (see Chapter 6) — he found Prometheus chained to his rock. He killed the eagle and set Prometheus free. Zeus approved, Prometheus was a free man (well, a free Titan), and Heracles got the bragging rights.

Checking out the World People Lived in, Courtesy of the Gods

The ancient Greeks thought the Earth was a round disk divided by the Mediterranean and Black Seas, as you can see by checking out Figure 3-2. The great river Oceanos flowed around the rim of the world.

The Greeks called the Black Sea the *Euxine Sea,* meaning the Friendly to Guests Sea; this may have been a named based on wishful thinking, because archaeologists have found many ancient shipwrecks at the bottom of the Black Sea. The word *Mediterranean* is Latin for "in the middle of the lands."

Permanent vacation and celebrity dinner parties: The Hyperboreans and Ethiopians

Up north of Oceanos was the land of the *Hyperboreans,* which some people think was Great Britain. It was a land of perpetual dancing, music, and happiness. The Muses lived near there, the locals were said to live for 1,000 years, and the god Apollo vacationed there in the winter.

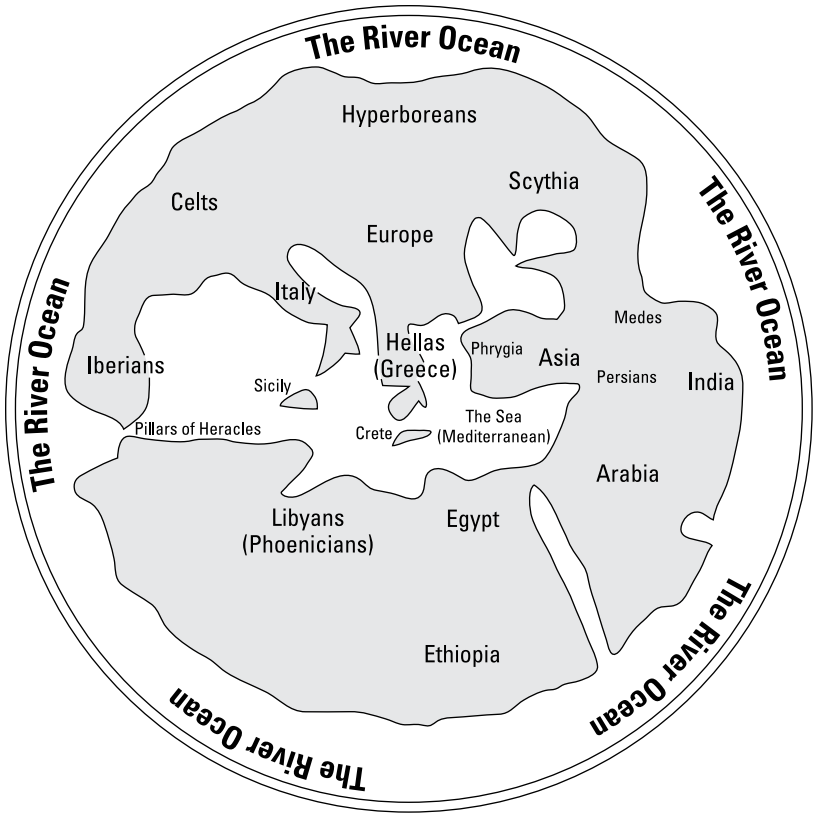

FIGURE 3-2: The way the Greeks saw the world.

To the south of the Greeks was Ethiopia. The people of Ethiopia were, according to mythology, on good terms with the gods and liked to entertain. When the gods have meetings in Greek myths, one or another of them is often absent, off having dinner with the Ethiopians. The mythical King of the Ethiopians is Memnon, the son of the goddess Eōs (Dawn); for more on Memnon, see Chapter 7.

Evil wrapped up all pretty: Pandora, the first woman

Zeus was upset because Prometheus stole fire and gave it to humans. So he punished Prometheus by chaining him to a rock. (You can read more about these incidents in "The love-hate triangle: Prometheus, people, and Zeus" earlier in the chapter.) However, Zeus still had to do something to put the humans in their place.

So Zeus created a woman named Pandora. All the gods gave her presents such as beauty (from Aphrodite), persuasion (from Hermes), and musical talent (from Apollo). Her name means "the gift of all," or possibly "having all gifts." However, the big deal here was that she was created to be curious. They sent her to earth and gave her to Epimetheus.

Gullible Epimetheus was thrilled with his new wife, even though his brother Prometheus had told him never to accept gifts from the gods. And Prometheus had been right. Pandora had brought another present with her, a jar that the gods had given her and told her not to open. But Pandora was so curious that she couldn't stand not knowing what was inside the jar, and one day she opened it.

REMEMBER

In English today, we call Pandora's container a box, but in ancient Greek it was a jar (*pyxis*).

That was a big mistake! As soon as she lifted the lid, hundreds of horrible monsters — all the plagues and torments that have bothered humans ever after — flew out. Pandora slammed the lid down, but she was too late to stop the evils from escaping. She managed, however, to keep one last thing inside the jar: Hope.

The phrase "Pandora's Box" has come to mean anything best left unopened or not discussed for fear of what may come out of it.

IS THE JAR HALF FULL OR HALF EMPTY?

The story of Pandora's Box is about the presence of evil and pain in the world, and our relation to evil and pain as mortal human beings. You can view Pandora's jar in two ways; one is optimistic, and the other is very pessimistic:

- The more positive interpretation is that Hope remains the possession of people because Pandora — a human — still holds it in her jar. Possessing hope helps humans deal with all the nastiness of the world.
- On the other hand, given the general pessimistic tone of the Greek creation myths, you have to consider another way of reading this myth. Pandora let evils loose in the world but kept Hope in the box. So violence, plague, famine, poverty, and hard labor are part of human existence, *but Hope isn't.*

Sailing through a Flood and Rebirth Story

REMEMBER

The Greeks had a myth about a great flood that killed everybody except a virtuous few, just like many other cultures (the Hebrews' version, with Noah, may be the most well-known to readers of this book; see Chapter 17 for more about some of those myths). The Greek flood story in the following sections fits the general pattern of flood myths, which have a universal flood killing everyone except for one couple chosen by the gods.

The best version of the Greek flood story comes from the poet Ovid. He was Roman, from the first century BCE, but his long poem *Metamorphoses* is full of Greek myths. The theme of that poem is "things changing into other things," and a great flood was terrific material for him. He describes dolphins swimming through fields of grain, people rowing boats where they used to plow, and fish building nests in tall trees. See Chapter 11 for more on Ovid and the myths he tells.

Human hospitality fail

The Greek flood story goes that Zeus, sensing that evil among human beings has gotten completely out of control, takes a tour to see for himself. When he visits a certain tyrant named Lycaon, he sees that the rumors haven't been even close to the truth. Zeus arrives at Lycaon's palace, announces that he is the god Zeus, and asks to be invited for dinner. All the people bow to worship him, but Lycaon laughs in Zeus's face and says, "A god, huh? We'll see about that!"

Then he sets out to test this so-called god. He kills one of his prisoners of war (a man from Molossia in Northern Greece), cooks him, and serves him to Zeus for dinner. He assumes that if his guest isn't a god, then he won't notice that he is eating a Molossian POW. The assumption is valid, but Lycaon evidently doesn't take into account the possibility that his guest really is a god.

Zeus, to whom *xenia* (meaning "guest-friendship," or hospitality) is especially important, takes one look at the entrée, blows Lycaon and his palace to bits with his lightning, cancels the rest of his fact-finding mission, and returns to Olympus.

TECHNICAL STUFF

The detail Ovid gives about the unfortunate man who ended up on Lycaon's menu — that he was Molossian — probably serves to make the tyrant's crime even worse as far as Zeus was concerned. The people of Molossia had a special relationship with Zeus. An oracle of Zeus, an old oak tree, stood at Dodona in Molossia. People could ask the tree their questions, and Zeus would give them answers. Alexander the Great was Molossian on his mother's side and used that fact to support his claim that he was the son of Zeus.

Deucalion and Pyrrha save the human race

Zeus gets his brother, the sea god Poseidon, to help him churn up a huge thunderstorm and flood the earth. It rains for nine days and nights. Water covers the land; only the top of Mount Parnassus sticks out. Almost everyone drowns. But Prometheus had protected his own family. He'd told his son, Deucalion, to build a wooden chest (compare that to the ark in the Hebrew flood myth in Chapter 17), fill it with food, and then get in it with his wife, Pyrrha, the daughter of Epimetheus and Pandora.

Deucalion and Pyrrha finally land on top of Mount Parnassus. The waters drain away, and they walk down the mountain until they find a temple. They hear a voice telling them to veil their heads and throw the bones of their mother behind themselves. Pyrrha is shocked because it would be sacrilegious to desecrate her mother's bones. Surely no god would ask them to do that! They think about this order and decide their "mother" is Gaia, the Earth, and that her "bones" must be stones. So they throw some stones, and these stones turn into people.

So in the end, Gaia gave birth not only to all the gods (as we describe earlier in the chapter) but also to a new generation of people!

IN THIS CHAPTER

- Hanging out with the king of the gods and his best bros
- Getting the scoop on new, younger gods: Apollo, Hephaestus, Hermes, Ares, and Dionysus

Chapter 4

Taller, Younger, and Better Looking Than You: The Olympian Gods

The Greeks saw the world as being divided into parts: sky, earth, ocean, and underworld. They had deities to handle all of these. The gods divided the universe among themselves, but Zeus was the supreme king. Other gods handled various aspects of human existence — medicine, music, love, wine, and the sun. Everything considered, the gods kept things running for humans and occasionally interfered in mortal lives.

REMEMBER

This chapter hits the main gods, but other folks turn up in myths from time to time. Sometimes old gods got blended with new ones but didn't always lose their names. Suffice it to say that many, many deities existed — someone for everyone.

Zeroing in on Zeus, Poseidon, and Hades: Big Daddy and His Brothers

According to most ancient writers, Zeus, Poseidon, and Hades are brothers, the sons of Rhea and Cronos. After they conquered the Titans and other monsters (see Chapter 3), they divided up the world among themselves. They did so by *drawing lots*, which is like drawing straws or throwing dice. Here's how they came out:

- Poseidon got the oceans and seas (and earthquakes and horses).
- Hades got the underworld and all the dead people.
- Zeus got the skies.

Because Zeus got the skies, that made him king of all the gods.

TECHNICAL STUFF

As we note in Chapter 3, much of this information comes from a poem called *Theogony* ("Birth of the Gods") by a man named Hesiod.

King Zeus, lover of women and thunderbolts

REMEMBER

As king of heaven, Zeus controls thunder, lightning, clouds, and rain. He's known as the sky god, and like every god or goddess, he has special symbols — the eagle and the oak tree. The Greeks believed that lightning happened when Zeus hurled his thunderbolt down from heaven like a javelin.

Zeus, like most of the Greek gods, has various *epithets* — second names similar to nicknames but more seriously intended — depending on what a person expected him to do. Here are a few:

- **Zeus Xenios:** Means "Guest Zeus." Using this name, travelers looking for a place to stay prayed to him because he makes sure that hosts treat their guests right.
- **Zeus Eleutherios:** Means "Freedom Zeus." Athenians living under a democratic government who found themselves in a war against the King of Persia prayed to him for strength in battle.
- **Zeus Nephelegereta:** Means "Zeus the Cloud Gatherer." This is Zeus when he's sending thunderstorms. Along those same lines are the epithets the Thunderer and Zeus Keraunos, or "Thunderbolt Zeus."

The Greeks knew that other cultures had different names for gods, but they assumed that any king of the gods, whatever his name, was Zeus. So they used the names of foreign gods as epithets for Zeus. Ammon was chief god of the Egyptian city of Thebes (a city the Greeks found impressive). So the Greeks referred to him as Zeus-Ammon. This approach was a good way for them to cover all their bases.

Scholars believe that Zeus actually is a combination of gods from various ancient lands. Whenever the worship of Zeus arrived in a city that already had a god, the two were joined together under Zeus's name. That may be one reason why Zeus had so many affairs with mortal women — cities liked to claim that their rulers were descended from a god, and Zeus eventually ended up with all the credit.

Taking whatever he wants

Zeus is married to the goddess Hera. See Chapter 5 for some of stories about Hera's relationship with her husband; those two would've been welcome guests on certain TV talk shows.

Many of Zeus and Hera's martial problems stem from Zeus's attraction to humans, especially women. He often visited these women in disguise and took advantage of them. These couplings usually resulted in semidivine offspring and in Hera's going off the deep end with violent jealousy. Here are a few of his more well-known affairs:

- **Danaë:** He visited her in the form of a golden shower of light. She gave birth to the hero Perseus.
- **Alcmena:** Zeus came to her in the shape of her husband. He spent the night with her, and then her husband came home and was disappointed to find his wife exhausted! She gave birth to twins; Heracles was Zeus's son, and the other baby was her husband's.
- **Leda:** Zeus turned into a swan to visit Leda, wife of King Tyndareus of Sparta. She had two immortal children with him: Helen (of Troy) and her brother, Pollux. Like with Heracles and his "twin," Pollux's twin, Castor, wasn't Zeus's son but rather the son of Leda's mortal husband.

  Because of the form Zeus took for his affair with Leda, these kids were hatched out of an egg! (See Chapter 7 for more about Helen.)
- **Io:** With the beautiful Io, Zeus tried disguising his partner rather than himself and turned the girl into a beautiful white cow. His jealous wife, Hera, asked Zeus to give her the Io-cow as a present and then sent a biting fly to plague her. Io eventually turned back into a woman and became the ancestress of Heracles. The Ionian Sea is named after her.

- **Europa:** Zeus turned himself into a beautiful bull and carried Europa over the Aegean Sea to Crete. One of her sons was King Minos of Crete. Europe is named after her.
- **Ganymede:** Not all of Zeus's mortal partners were female. Ganymede was a beautiful Trojan prince. Zeus changed himself into an eagle and carried Ganymede to Olympus to serve Zeus's wine and do him other favors.

Realizing his limits

Zeus is king, and although he's the *most* powerful, he isn't *all-powerful.* Not only did he get grief from his wife, but in some stories he also was tied by Fate just like any mortal. For example, during the Trojan War (see Chapter 7), one of Zeus's many illegitimate sons, Sarpedon, was a warrior on the Trojan side. In the *Iliad*, Zeus learns that Sarpedon is about to get killed in battle. He tells Hera that he's tempted to save the man. Hera says, "Do whatever you want, but the rest of us gods won't obey you anymore if you go against Fate." So apparently Zeus *could* defy Fate, but not without losing his authority.

Poseidon, god of the sea and full-time macho man

REMEMBER

Poseidon is god of the sea. He's also in charge of horses, earthquakes, and sometimes bulls. He causes storms and can also calm the waters if he so chooses. His wife is Amphitrite, one of the 50 daughters of the river god Nereus; they had a daughter named Benthesicyme.

For a sea god to be associated with horses seems strange, but some myths say that he turned himself into a stallion one time while chasing the goddess Demeter. Some scholars have suggested that the association occurred because the worship of Poseidon arrived in Greece at the same time as horses. The Greeks sacrificed horses to him, especially stallions (Poseidon also had a reputation for extreme masculinity).

One of Poseidon's epithets is Earth-shaker — appropriate for the patron of earthquakes. Others include Wave-dashing, Earth-holding, Hippius ("Horsey"), Horse-tending, Nurturer, Overseer, Securer, and Pelagaeus ("Oceany").

Sailors and fishermen worshipped Poseidon, for obvious reasons. Many coastal towns named themselves Poseidonia after him and took him as their sponsor.

Identifying Poseidon in ancient art and pop culture

Figure 4-1 may show Poseidon, who is often depicted carrying a trident or a three-pronged spear. Fishermen used tridents to spear fish. The DC Comics character Aquaman has a lot in common with the Greek Poseidon. The (much less impressive) character The Deep from the series *The Boys* is like Poseidon turned into an antihero.

FIGURE 4-1: Poseidon (probably).

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TECHNICAL STUFF

Ancients could identify statues and other artistic renditions of gods and goddesses by the things they wore or carried. For example, a middle-aged man with a thunderbolt was Zeus, but if he held a trident, he was Poseidon. A handsome young man with a crown of laurel leaves was Apollo; if he wore ivy, he was Dionysus.

Fighting over cities

Poseidon once got into a bidding war with Athena over which god would get to be the protector of the then-unnamed city of (spoiler alert) Athens. Poseidon promised horses and made a spring of salt water flow from the hill of the Acropolis in the center of town. Athena promised lots of olive trees. Now, horses don't do well

in countryside as rocky as the land around Athens, and a spring of salt water isn't especially handy. On the other hand, olive trees are great; even before the invention of the martini, olives were incredibly useful, mainly for their oil. People burned it in lamps, made it into soap, conditioned their hair with it, and ate it (delicious, loaded with calories, and cheaper than meat). So Athena won, and today the capital of modern Greece (or *Hellas,* as the Greeks call it) is Athens, not Poseidonia.

Butting heads with humans and other deities

Poseidon bears a grudge against the mortal hero Odysseus because Odysseus blinded his son, the Cyclops Polyphemus (see Chapter 6). Another of his sons is Orion, a Giant and hunter whom Artemis kills. Orion the Hunter is now one of the most prominent constellations in the North American sky: The three bright stars of Orion's belt are especially obvious, and their appearance in the sky means that winter is coming.

Hades, god of the underworld: The land down under (like way under!)

REMEMBER

Hades is god of the underworld and king of the dead. His domain is often called Hades, too. (In Chapter 3, we talk about how Tartarus, the second-generation underworld god came to be the name for the deepest part of the underworld.) Evidently, running the underworld is a full-time job, because Hades doesn't have a long list of responsibilities like his brothers Zeus and Poseidon.

Getting to know the real Hades

Hades is often called Pluto, a name related to the Greek word *plutos,* which means "wealth." Gold, silver, and precious stones come out of the ground — that is, out of Hades's realm. Sometimes Hades is called Golden Reined in reference to the chariot he drives around in. His other epithets include the Warder (because he's in charge of keeping the dead in the underworld) and the All Receiver (because every mortal ends up in his realm).

These names indicate that although Hades wasn't everyone's favorite god, he isn't actually evil — he isn't a Greek version of Satan, and his realm isn't like the Christian concept of hell.

Hades is married to Persephone, Demeter's daughter (see Chapter 5 for this story). They never had children.

Heading to the underworld

The road to the underworld was the same for everyone; good and bad people didn't have separate facilities, although certain bad people were singled out for special punishments.

The gates of the underworld were guarded by a three-headed dog named Cerberus. Cerberus wagged his tail to greet new arrivals but ate anyone who tried to leave.

Introducing the Other Boys in the Band: Young Male Gods

Apart from the Big Three of Zeus, Poseidon, and Hades, there are other male gods: Apollo, Hephaestus, Hermes, Ares, and Dionysus. With the exception of Hephaestus, they're all young and good-looking. In fact, when the Greeks thought of their gods and goddesses, they seemed to picture them as simply being perfect humans. The gods have certain powers and don't die — that's what *immortal* means. They remain in the prime of life forever but in other ways are pretty much like normal folks.

As with Zeus, Poseidon, and Hades (see the earlier section "Zeroing in on Zeus, Poseidon, and Hades: Big Daddy and His Brothers"), these other guy-gods have their own various areas of expertise and authority.

Apollo, handsome jukebox hero

Apollo, son of Zeus and Leto (a mortal woman), is also Artemis's twin brother. Artemis was born first and helped her mother deliver Apollo.

Apollo is always portrayed as an extremely handsome young man. He's the god of light, truth, and healing. He's also an athlete. The laurel tree is his special plant, and victorious athletes would receive a crown of laurels as their prize for winning competitions.

REMEMBER

One of Apollo's most important roles was as sponsor of the oracle at Delphi. Delphi was like the center of the world for ancient people; anyone who wanted their fortune told went there to get a message from the priestess, who inhaled the vapors from a crack in the earth and then revealed the messages that the god sent her.

Playing a lyre or playing a liar?

Apollo is famous for music and often plays on a *lyre,* a kind of stringed instrument that probably sounded nothing like a modern guitar. The Greeks thought of the lyre as a refined, orderly instrument in contrast to the wild flutes that the followers of Dionysus preferred.

But despite being a god of music, Apollo wasn't the kindest of musical competitors. Once a *satyr* (creatures who were men up top and goats below the waist) named Marsyas challenged him to a musical contest. For the prize, the winner could do whatever he liked to the loser. Apollo played his lyre and Marsyas played the pipes. During the competition, Apollo turned his lyre upside down and challenged Marsyas to do the same thing with his pipes. Marsyas couldn't, so he lost the contest. Apollo then killed him by hanging him on a pine tree and stripping off his skin. (For more about satyrs, see the "Building an entourage of misfits" section later in the chapter.)

TECHNICAL STUFF

The gory flaying of Marsyas was a popular subject for painters in the Renaissance.

Ruling over the sun, medicine, and a few other jobs

Apollo is sometimes called the god of the sun, who drives his chariot across the sky every day, pulling the sun from east to west. Other stories say that the sun god is named Helios.

TIP

You can think of Apollo as the "God of the Sun" and Helios as the personification of the sun.

Medicine and purification are also Apollo's provinces. Anyone who killed a parent or a guest, even by accident, got covered by *miasma,* a kind of pollution that was invisible but nasty enough to make the murderer an outcast. Apollo and his priests know the rituals that clean off the miasma and allow the repentant killer to return to normal society.

Apollo is also the guardian of epic poets and sometimes was said to be the leader of the Muses.

Standing for something: Apollo's symbols

Apollo has various symbols. One is the lyre, a Greek harp. Another is the laurel tree (whose leaves are the *bay leaves* sold in grocery stores) because of an encounter with a young woman named Laurel (well, Daphne in Greek). You can read that whole story in the "Chasing after girls before they turn into trees: Apollo and

Daphne" section later in this chapter. The dolphin is another symbol of Apollo because he once sent a dolphin to save the life of a young harpist named Arion, who was about to be thrown off of a ship by some evil sailors.

Calling Apollo by all his names

Like some of the other gods, Apollo has a lot of epithets well. Some of the more popular ones are

- **Phoebus Apollo (or just Phoebus):** *Phoebus* means "bright."
- **Delian Apollo:** After the island of Delos where he was born.
- **Pythian Apollo:** Apollo learned the art of prophecy from Pan. He went to the oracle at Delphi, which was guarded by the snake Python. Python tried to stop him from approaching, but he killed the snake.
- **Apollo Smintheus or Rat Apollo:** This epithet is the manifestation of the god who sent plagues, like the one at the beginning of the *Iliad*. It may also come from the particular worship of Apollo in the city of Sminthe, which is near Troy.
- **Loxias:** Apollo consulted prophetesses known as *sibyls.* (Sybil still happens to be a fairly common name today.) This name means "tricky" because the prophetesses spoke in tongues.

TECHNICAL STUFF

The most famous sibyl was the high priestess in Delphi named Pythia (after the snake the python). Pythia inhaled fumes of burning bay leaves or vapors coming up from cracks in the rocks, got really high, and then told people their fortunes. It was a profitable business.

Chasing after girls before they turn into trees: Apollo and Daphne

Daphne is the daughter of a river god. She's incredibly beautiful but had no interest in men, preferring to run free in the woods. One day, Apollo saw her and immediately fell in love. He chased her through the woods, yelling to her that he was a god and he loved her and wouldn't she please stop so they could make sweet love. But Daphne kept running.

She finally reached her father's riverbank at the same moment that Apollo caught up to her. Just as he reached out for her, she called to her father to help her. Dad obliged by turning her into a laurel tree ("laurel" is *daphnē* in Greek); in Figure 4-2, Apollo finds himself embracing a tree trunk. Daphne's transformation either saved her virginity or (the pessimistic view) put her completely in Apollo's power. In Bernini's sculpture, she already is transforming just as Apollo catches her.

As a sort of consolation prize to himself, Apollo then declared that the laurel would always be his special tree. And Daphne didn't have to give herself up.

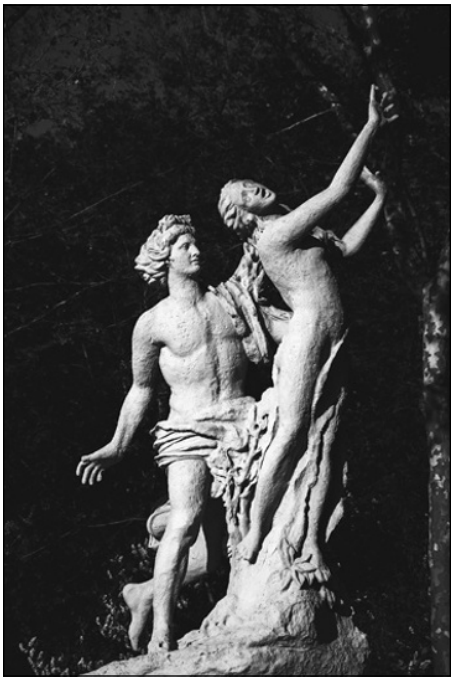

FIGURE 4-2: Daphne's transformation into a laurel tree.

Hephaestus: He has a great personality . . .

Hephaestus is the god of fire and the *forge*, the big fiery pit blacksmiths used to work metal. He's also the god of volcanos (the Romans called him by the name "Vulcan"). Hera, queen of the gods, gave birth to him by herself. (See Chapter 5 for how Hephaestus' birth may or may not be related to the birth of the goddess Athena.) He is extremely skillful.

Being the only ugly god

Hephaestus is ugly and has a limp. Some ancient accounts attribute these characteristics to the fact that Hera produces him by herself. To the male-dominated Greek society, it made sense that if a man produces a child all by himself, the child will be wonderful (such as Athena, Zeus's solo effort — see Chapter 5), but if a woman tries it, the result will be inferior.

You can find variations on Hephaestus's story. Some say he is born ugly but gets his limp from being thrown off Mount Olympus by Hera (who is angry about his looks) or by Zeus (who is angry that his wife had a baby without him). Other versions say that he is born ugly and with a physical disability.

Hephaestus lives on Olympus with the rest of the deities and enjoys a certain amount of respect — all the gods live in houses that Hephaestus built for them! In a huge irony, the ugly god Hephaestus is married to the beautiful Aphrodite.

Building items fit for the gods

REMEMBER

Hephaestus spends his time making armor and weapons and building houses and furniture for his fellow gods. He has lovely female robotic assistants made of gold who help him in his work. The Greeks say that his forge is under a volcano and that volcanic eruptions are a sign that the god is at work. Achilles's mom, the goddess Thetis, commissioned Hephaestus to make new armor for her son, including the fabulous Shield of Achilles described in Homer's *Iliad* (see Chapter 7).

The Olympian gods, with the possible exception of Ares (see the following section), like Hephaestus, who works hard to keep everyone happy and to stop arguments among the gods. Homer describes how, when quarreling breaks out during a feast of the gods, Hephaestus grabs the wine pitcher and goes around the table refilling everyone's cup. The sight of the gentle, ugly god hobbling around busily makes all the gods laugh and forget their fight.

The Athenians loved Hephaestus, too, because he is peaceful, kind, and a patron of craftsmen. A large temple in ancient Athens was built in his honor and called the Hephaestion.

Ares, god of war

REMEMBER

Ares is the god of war. His parents are Zeus and Hera, neither one of whom like him very much (at least according to Homer). In the *Iliad*, Zeus tells Ares that he's the "most hateful of the gods" right to his face!

Not getting voted most popular in high school

Ares embodies the destructive forces of war, the part that people don't really like. The goddess Athena, on the other hand, is also a war goddess, but she is in charge of the intelligent and orderly use of war to defend the city.

Because of this difference in violent proclivity, the Greek people didn't like Ares much. Homer has him fighting on the Trojan side in the *Iliad,* while Athena fights

for the Greeks. Ares is ferocious and loud and generally unpleasant to be around. On the other hand, the Greeks definitely admired brave warriors and courage in battle, and that gave him a certain measure of popularity. A hill in Athens named Areopagus, which means "hill of Ares," is where Ares is tried for murder and acquitted (see Chapter 8). An important political council used to meet on the hill, perhaps to discuss war, which also may account for the name.

All's fair in love and war: Getting together with Aphrodite

Although Aphrodite is married to Hephaestus, Ares is Aphrodite's lover. Some scholars have suggested that the two of them got together because they both represented wild impulses that subvert order and organization; people crazed with lust or crazed with war don't make the sensible decisions that a practical goddess such as Athena would've preferred. This union produced three sons:

- Eros (Love)
- Deimus (Fear)
- Phobus (Panic)

A funny scene in the *Iliad* tells of Ares and Aphrodite getting caught in bed together. Aphrodite's husband Hephaestus hangs a golden net over the bed, drops it on them, and then calls all the other gods and goddesses to laugh at them. His revenge isn't that successful, though, because most of the gods agree that going to bed with Aphrodite would be worth getting caught in a net.

EROS, GOD OF SEX

Eros is the force that drives people together with physical desire, heterosexual or homosexual. He is often said to be Aphrodite's son, and possibly even the son of Ares, although in Hesiod (see Chapter 3), he is around since the beginning of the world. He is relatively minor, since he is kind of a sidekick to Aphrodite (see Chapter 5).

He is full of mischief and loves to play tricks on humans and gods, making them fall in love suddenly. In his later depiction, he is a beautiful young man with a bow and arrows and wings on his back; the arrows made people fall in love. Eros was a pretty popular god in ancient Greece, and lots of people belonged to his cults. His name is the root of the English word *erotic.* The Romans knew Eros as Cupid, but the Greek version and the Roman version are different. Cupid is a cute, pudgy baby, but Eros is a malevolent, dangerous teenager whose arrows are real and can kill!

Hermes, fleet of foot and mind

REMEMBER

Hermes is the messenger of the gods and a beautiful young man. He is the son of Zeus and Maia, the daughter of the Titan Atlas. He wears a cap and sandals with wings on them and also carries a staff wrapped with snakes — the *caduceus* (shown in Figure 4-3), the same thing that doctors use as their symbol now. In the ancient world, the caduceus was the symbol of heralds.

In addition to these characteristic articles, Hermes is often represented by a shepherd's crook. He uses one for shepherding folks on their journeys and driving dead souls down to the underworld, which are all part of his responsibilities.

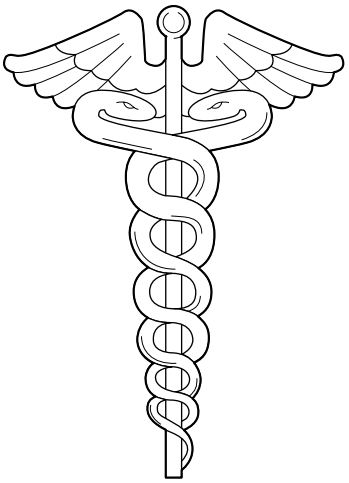

FIGURE 4-3: The caduceus.

Actually, Hermes has a huge number of jobs; apparently his swiftness enabled him to accomplish many different things at once. Here are some of Hermes's other duties:

- He is the god of commerce and traders.
- He acts as Zeus's go-between for delicate negotiations (such as the purchase of the Trojan prince Ganymede), runs errands for him, and arranges his amorous liaisons.
- He is a patron of children and heroes and transports divine children to safety (he brought baby Dionysus to the nymphs at Nysa).
- He is a god of fertility and prosperity, of athletes and the gymnasium, and of thieves.

Serving as a hero to the heroes

Hermes' epithets include Argus Slayer (after the monster he kills as a kid), and Psychopompos or Soul Leader (after his role in bringing the dead down to Hades). The Athenian comedian Aristophanes pokes fun at his own culture's tendency to give each god a million epithets. In the play *The Frogs,* two characters have a comic argument over whether it's better to pray on behalf of a dead father to Hermes Patrios (Ancestor Hermes) or Hermes Chthonios (Underworld Hermes).

Living life as a single father

Hermes doesn't have a wife of his own, though he does have children. Pan is his son. The deity Hermaphroditus, half male and half female, is the child of Hermes and Aphrodite. This deity has female breasts and male genitals.

Hermaphroditus gives the English language the word *hermaphrodite,* meaning having both male and female sexual characteristics.

Inventing the lyre

Hermes is extremely clever and cunning. When he was one day old, he stole all of Apollo's cattle. He led them away (walking backward to disguise the direction they had gone), sacrificed two of them, and hid the rest in a cave. He and Apollo made up after Hermes gave back the cattle and presented Apollo with the first lyre, which he had just invented by killing a turtle and stretching strings across its shell. They made a pleasant twanging sound. Apollo loved the instrument and apparently became quite skilled at drawing music out of it.

Dionysus, the party god

Dionysus, god of wine and of vegetation in general, is a latecomer to Olympian deities.

Dionysus is the son of Zeus and the Theban princess Semele, so he has one mortal parent. He also achieved divinity during his lifetime, unlike another, Heracles (see Chapter 6), who also had one divine and one mortal parent. But his birth was very weird. When Semele was pregnant, Zeus swore an oath on the river Styx that he'd do anything she asked him to. She asked to see him in his full glory. Zeus was dismayed; no human could see him that way and live. But he'd promised, so he showed himself to her in flame and splendor.

As he knew would happen, Semele dropped dead immediately. Zeus snatched out her unborn baby, Dionysus, and hid him in his own body to finish gestating in his thigh.

After Dionysus was born, Hermes took the baby to be raised by the nymphs (or, depending on the story, by Athamas and Ino, the King and Queen of Boeotia, in central Greece) in the beautiful valley of Nysa. Later, Dionysus missed the mother he'd never known and went to ask Hades if he could have her back. Hades agreed, and Dionysus brought Semele up to Olympus to live with the gods. Hera, Zeus's wife, was understandably upset and made Dionysus *and* Athamas and Ino temporarily insane. She evidently relented after a while, and they all got their wits back.

Reppin' the wine god

The most common symbol associated with Dionysus is by far the vine — either the grapevine (the source of wine) or ivy (which makes nice garlands to wear on the head while drinking wine). The masks that actors wore in tragedies and comedies also symbolize Dionysus.

Calling on the twice-born god

Dionysus's childhood history gave him the epithet Twice Born. Other epithets reflect his identity as a party god: Acratophorus ("Bringer of Unmixed Wine"), Nocturnal, and Torch-bearing. Others have to do with fertility or the natural world: Flowery, Ivy, or Of the Black Goatskin. Perhaps because of the magical properties of wine, he has the epithets Savior and Deliverer. And because he was a sort of "Joe Six Pack" god, he occasionally sports the nickname Citizen Dionysus.

Kidnapping a god isn't a good idea

When Dionysus was just a boy, some pirates spotted him and decided to capture him. He looked like a beautiful black-haired young man with a fancy purple cloak, and they thought he must be the son of a king who could pay a good ransom. But as they sailed away, Dionysus caused ivy vines to cover the ship, threw the pirates into the sea, and turned them into dolphins.

Building an entourage of misfits

Dionysus spends his time wandering the earth teaching people how to grow grapes and turn them into wine. He traveled with an entourage of his own long before today's celebrities started doing it. They were unusual creatures and included the following:

- **Maenads:** *Maenads* (*bacchantes* in Latin) were the female worshippers of Dionysus, his "Fly Girls."
- **Satyrs:** Pan (the son of Hermes, born in Arcadia) and his buddies, the satyrs (called *fauns* in Rome), danced around playing pipes, drinking, and having wild sex with each other and the woodland nymphs. Satyrs were often painted

with enormous erections or playing with giant dildos. Pan loved woodlands and mountains and was the god of goatherds and shepherds. The word *panic* comes from his name — when people heard his sounds in the woods at night, they'd lose control.

- **Seileni:** In some ancient sources, these guys are half human, half horse, and chummed around with Dionysus and Hephaestus. But as time went by, *Silenus* came to be a synonym for satyr.

Worshipping in wild ways

The ancients had mixed feelings about worshipping Dionysus. On one hand, everyone loved the happy feeling they got from drinking wine — it made them brave and eloquent and confident. On the other hand, when people drank too much, they sometimes did crazy things.

One form of Dionysian worship was pretty gruesome. Women called maenads would drink themselves into a frenzy and then run through the woods ripping apart animals and (at least in the plot of one Greek tragedy) people with their bare hands and teeth.

When Dionysus tried to bring his religion to Thebes, King Pentheus frowned on this culture of drinking, dancing, and partying. Dionysus made him insane and caused the women of Thebes to tear Pentheus limb from limb. Pentheus's own mother ended up carrying his head, thinking she'd killed a leopard.

Friedrich Nietzsche, the German philosopher, got a lot of mileage out of describing all of ancient Greek culture as a competition between Apollo (rational, reasonable, orderly) and Dionysus (drunk, crazed, chaotic). You probably can't categorize a whole culture this way, but people still find it useful to talk about aspects of a culture as being either *Apollonian* or *Dionysian*.

IN THIS CHAPTER

- Meeting the wives: Hera and Aphrodite
- Visiting Mother Nature: Demeter
- Encountering the virgin goddesses
- Getting to know the Muses, Fates, Furies, and Graces

Chapter 5

The Fairest and Meanest of Them All: The Greek Goddesses

When the Greeks thought of goddesses, just like when they thought of gods, they pictured powerful, beautiful, immortal versions of normal human beings. So the goddesses, even though they're powerful, beautiful, and immortal, do the things that mortal women did: Some get married (a few never do), occasionally have affairs, have kids, fight with their husbands and lovers, make up with their husbands and lovers, and often resent how the male gods get to make all the rules.

In this chapter, we introduce you to all the key players, from the Olympian queens to the lesser — but still influential — ladies of ancient Greek religion. You get a taste of their charm and rage and feel the influence they had over the Greek world. You'll see their power over human lives, from love, marriage, and childbirth to agriculture and war. And you'll see that some of the goddesses are like dramatic characters in a movie, while some are more like abstractions: grace, victory, strife.

Hera, Aphrodite, and Demeter: Wives and Mothers

Most Greek women spent much of their lives as wives and mothers. Likewise, Hera, Aphrodite, and Demeter are three of the most important goddesses, and all of them are powerful symbols of forces that hold human society together: love, marriage, and parenthood. Hera is Zeus's wife (and often has cause for complaint); Aphrodite is married to Hephaestus (but has a famous affair with Ares); Demeter is famous for her love for her daughter and her heroic quest to rescue her from a kidnapping.

Queen Hera, protector of marriage (except her own)

Hera is Zeus's wife. She's also his sister, but that didn't bother anyone. Hera and Zeus are children of Rhea and Cronos.

REMEMBER

Don't let the incest that occurs among the gods and goddesses give you the wrong idea. Incest was forbidden in Greece just like it was in most other cultures. But the gods play by different rules.

Hera is the female equivalent of Zeus, queen of heaven. Greek women worshipped Hera as the goddess of marriage and the home. Greek women sometimes saw in Hera all the stages of women's lives: girlhood, matrimony, motherhood, and widowhood. Hera is definitely royal — she's noble and beautiful and often depicted sitting on a throne. Hera also protects cities and some social groups.

Hera's daughter Ilithyia helps women in childbirth. Hera's other children are Ares, Hebe, and Hephaestus, the third of whom she bore all on her own (with no help from Zeus) in revenge for Zeus's giving birth to Athena by himself. (See Chapter 4.) In some accounts, she also gave birth to the monster Typhon by herself.

Imperial displays and titles for only a special few

Hera's symbols are the peacock, because it's fancy, flashy, and fit for a queen, and the cow (she turned at least one of her husband's girlfriends into a cow).

Hera has some obvious epithets: Protectress (especially in Argos, which is her special city), Bride, and Olympian (just like her husband Zeus). Others seem stranger: Full-grown and Ox-eating. The Stymphalian people even knew her as Hera the Widow, an ironic epithet that refers to the frequency with which Zeus cheated on her.

NYMPHS

Who are *nymphs?* They are minor female deities who gallivanted around the woods scantily attired. Greek mythology didn't limit itself to the main Olympian gods; sometimes it seemed that every rock, tree, and body of water had its own guardian spirit. There were nymphs specific to certain kinds of trees, like the Meliae (ash trees) or Dryads (oak trees), or for other geographic features, like the Oreads (mountain nymphs), Nereids (ocean nymphs), and Naiads (river nymphs). Some ancient stories suggest that the nymphs were not actually immortal, just that they lived a long time. Today, a nymph is an immature insect. Charming. The word also denotes sexy young girls, though sometimes people use the diminutive *nymphette.*

That no-good man of mine

Hera spent a lot of time pursuing Zeus's human mistresses and illegitimate children. For example, when Zeus fell in love and fathered a son with the girl Callisto, Hera turned her into a bear. When Callisto's son grew up, Hera sent the Callisto-bear in front of him while he was out hunting. Zeus snatched up Callisto before their son could accidentally kill his mother and turned her into a constellation of stars — the Big Bear (which is the same as the Big Dipper). Callisto's son later became a constellation himself, the Little Bear (Little Dipper). Whatever the rationale for Zeus's continual gallivanting (see Chapter 4), Greek wives probably enjoyed hearing about the punishments the goddess inflicted on her rivals.

One time, Hera was angry with Zeus for some reason, and he consulted a wise man on how to win her back. The man told him to make a wooden statue of a woman, drape it with cloth, and announce that she was his bride. Zeus did as he was told; Hera heard about it and raced to the scene, tore off the drapery, and was delighted to find a wooden statue rather than a flesh-and-blood woman. They were reconciled with one another, and that was the start of a regular festival involving wooden statues.

Mad enough to start a war

Hera is vain, the way most Greek goddesses seem to be, and on one notable occasion, her vanity (combined with the vanity of Athena and Aphrodite) caused a war. During a wedding reception, the goddess of strife, Eris, threw down an apple labeled "To the Fairest." The three most powerful goddesses each claimed to be the fairest and, thus, the most deserving of the apple. For complicated reasons — the whole story appears in Chapter 7 — a young Trojan man named Paris found himself judging the relative beauty of the three goddesses. Each resorted to bribery, and Aphrodite's bribe — marriage to the most beautiful woman in the world — carried the day.

Hera was so angry that she swore revenge on Paris and his entire nation. Her reaction led to the Trojan War (source of about a thousand mythological stories), the deaths of many heroes, and even the founding of the Roman people (see Chapter 10).

Hera and Heracles: 'Til death do you annoy me

Hera didn't limit her vengeance to Zeus's girlfriends. When he had an affair with Alcmena, who bore a baby son, Heracles, Hera took an immediate dislike to the baby. In fact, the name *Heracles* means either "the fame of Hera" or perhaps "famous because of Hera."

Hera's anger was certainly caused by this further evidence of her husband's infidelity, but Zeus didn't help matters. In a typically tactless moment, Zeus asked Hera whether she'd mind breastfeeding his new illegitimate son to make him immortal. Hera's answer was to arrange to have the baby killed.

TECHNICAL STUFF

In one account, Zeus actually brought baby Heracles to Hera while she was sleeping so he could nurse on the sly. She woke up and pushed him away. Milk shot out of her nipple and turned into the Milky Way.

Hera sent two snakes to kill the boy in his crib. See Chapter 6 for the rest of that story. Later, Hera made grown-up Heracles go crazy and kill his wife and sons, and she riled up the Amazons against him.

After Heracles died (and was made into a god by Zeus), Hera apparently relented. She agreed to give him her daughter Hebe (goddess of youth) as his wife and even let him come live with the gods on Olympus.

Aphrodite, fertile femme fatale

Ah, Aphrodite. The goddess of love. Aphrodite was born out of the sea where Uranus's genitals fell in after Cronos cut them off as we describe in Chapter 3. Sandro Botticelli's famous painting *Birth of a Virgin* (see Figure 5-1) showed her coming ashore in Cyprus on half of a giant shell. In the epic poetry of Homer, though, she's the daughter of Zeus and Dione, a female Titan. (The *Titans* are the second generation of gods in Greek mythology; see Chapter 3.)

REMEMBER

Aphrodite is beautiful and sexy and lives to make people fall in love with her and each other. She stands for what the Greeks saw as the good and bad aspects of female nature: seductive charm, desire for children, and a capacity for deception. She's the goddess of erotic love — of whatever variety — and of fertility. She was also the winner of the beauty contest that started the Trojan War we mention in the earlier section "Mad enough to start a war."

FIGURE 5-1: Botticelli's depiction of Aphrodite in his painting *Birth of a Virgin.*

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She's from the seashell by the seashore, but she's not called Shelley

Aphrodite's symbols include the shell on which she rode to shore after being born of the sea; the swan, sparrow, and dove; and the myrtle tree (all pretty things that can symbolize love).

Aphrodite often has the epithet Cyprian, after the island of Cyprus, where she beached her seashell after her birth. Other epithets include Bridal Aphrodite, Aphrodite of the Deep Sea, Heavenly Aphrodite, and Aphrodite Victorious. The most interesting epithet for her is Black, perhaps referring to the fertility of the black earth, or for her power over, ahem, things that go on at night.

Probably voted most popular in high school

Aphrodite was one of the more popular goddesses. The Greeks worshipped her as the person in charge of sexuality and reproduction — both fun and necessary to keep the community going. Brides made sacrifices to Aphrodite to help make their first sexual experience a good one. Prostitutes worshipped her. She had a lot to do with fertility of the land as well. Poets loved her and her power of love.

In a cosmic joke, the lovely Aphrodite was married to the ugly Hephaestus. Why they got together is anybody's guess, but they don't seem to have gotten along very well. Aphrodite's real love was Ares, the god of war. See Chapter 4 for more about their affair.

In Virgil's epic poem, the *Aeneid,* Aphrodite (going by her Roman name Venus) is the hero Aeneas's best pal, just like Athena is to the Greek hero Odysseus in Homer's *Odyssey.* That made sense because she happened to be his mother, too.

Aphrodite's other son is named Eros. (Hesiod mentions an Eros born from Chaos, but this Eros seems quite different from the little boy described by later writers.) He is a beautiful young boy who goes around with a bow and arrows. Whenever he shot someone with an arrow, they fell in love with someone else. Aphrodite and the other gods sometimes gets him to shoot particular targets: Aphrodite has him shoot Zeus to make him fall in love with a woman named Europa, and Hera persuades him to shoot Medea and make her fall in love with Jason (see Chapter 6).

Eros is the root of the word *erotic,* meaning sexy. An *aphrodisiac,* from the name Aphrodite, is a substance that puts someone in the mood for love.

Part-time lover: Adonis

Adonis was a human man. Aphrodite fell in love with him the moment he was born. She took him away from his family and brought him down to Persephone, queen of the underworld, for safekeeping.

Persephone fell in love with him, too, and refused to give him back to Aphrodite. The two goddesses fought about this, and finally Zeus stepped in to referee. He decided Adonis would spend autumn and winter with Persephone and spring and summer with Aphrodite.

Adonis spent most of his time hunting, and Aphrodite liked to dress up as a huntress and go with him. One day, however, he was hunting alone and tried to kill a wild boar with his spear. Unfortunately, he only wounded it, and the enraged beast gored him with its tusks.

Aphrodite heard him scream and flew to him. He was rapidly bleeding to death, and the goddess couldn't help him. So she kissed him as he died, and everywhere his blood touched the ground, blood-red *anemones,* or windflowers, sprang up.

Demeter, Mother Nature and master gardener

Demeter is in a class by herself, an earth goddess who doesn't live on Mount Olympus with the rest of the immortals. But she's just as important as the other Olympian goddesses. She's the daughter of Cronos and Rhea and is the goddess who makes grain grow in the fields. She isn't the goddess of the earth — that's Gaia — but she was much more important to most Greeks because of her role in agriculture and nature.

She's corny but must not be named

Demeter's symbols are the things of the harvest: ears of grain, little cakes (which folks placed on her altar), and scythes and sickles (the tools used in the harvest).

One of Demeter's more interesting epithets is The Unnamed Maiden, suggesting that it was unlucky to name such a powerful goddess. She often appears as Eleusinian Demeter, after the town of Eleusis, near Athens, which was an important center of Demeter worship. Other epithets name her power over growing things: Fruit-bearer, Sender-of-Gifts, Green, and Black (after the black, and therefore fertile, soil).

The rape of Persephone and the origin of the seasons

Demeter had one daughter, Persephone, whom she loved to distraction. One day Hades, King of the Dead (more about him in Chapter 4), got a glimpse of Persephone and decided to steal her. He got Zeus to help him by creating a beautiful flower, the narcissus, and planting it in some rocks. (This event contradicts another story about the origin of the narcissus, the one with Echo and Narcissus. That's the way mythology is.)

Persephone saw the flower and wandered away from her friends to pick it. See Chapter 4 to find out how this story turned out — suffice it to say Persephone became Hades's wife.

Demeter went on strike; all plants stopped growing, and she said she wouldn't go back to work until she had her daughter back. Zeus hadn't worried about Persephone or thought his brother Hades had done anything bad, but after talking to Demeter, he decided that Hades would have to give up the girl. He sent Hermes down to the underworld to bring her back.

Hades realized he'd have to return his "wife" to her mother. But before she left, he gave her a pomegranate, and she ate four (or maybe six) seeds out of it. Hermes brought Persephone back to Demeter, and the two had a fond reunion. But Demeter got worried — rightfully — when Persephone told her about the pomegranate.

Zeus's mother, Rhea, informed Demeter that because Persephone had eaten those pomegranate seeds, she'd have to go back to Hades for part of every year. Demeter consented, though she didn't want to give up her daughter again. After that, Demeter was happy and made plants grow for the part of the year when Persephone was with her, but when her daughter went back to Hades, Demeter mourned and stopped working. That's where winter comes from.

Undercover goddess: Demeter gets a temple at Eleusis

While Demeter was wandering around missing Persephone, she disguised herself as an old woman. One day she sat down to rest beside a well in a town called Eleusis. Four young sisters asked her what she was doing there, and she said she'd escaped from pirates who wanted to sell her as a slave. The girls brought Demeter home to their mother, Metanaira, who hired the goddess as a *wet nurse* (a woman who breastfeeds a baby in place of its mother) for her baby boy.

Wet-nursing was extremely common in the ancient world. Many women who could afford to preferred to hire a nurse rather than breastfeed their babies themselves.

Demeter loved the baby and decided to make him immortal. So every night when the family was asleep, she put him in the fire, which evidently would've made him immortal if she could've finished the job. But Metanaira saw her in the act one night and grabbed her baby in a panic.

Angry, Demeter yelled at the poor woman that she would've saved her son from old age and death, but now it was too late. Then she revealed her true identity and demanded that Metanaira and her town build her a temple. All the townspeople pitched in, and when the temple was done, Demeter went and sat there, missing her daughter.

Look but Don't Touch! The Virgin Goddesses

Some goddesses were virgins. But two goddesses in particular were known for their virginity. Artemis was the sexy kind of virgin; men who saw her lusted after her but never got anywhere (except in big trouble). Athena was most famous for her virginity — the most famous temple in Greece, the Parthenon in Athens, bears her epithet *Parthenos,* which means virgin. Virtually no myth about Athena suggests, however, that men lusted after her — she was too powerful, too impressive, and too scary for men of Greek antiquity.

Athena, the real GI Jane

One day Zeus came down with a terrible headache. He called the blacksmith Hephaestus over and asked him to split his head open with an ax. Out sprang Athena, full-grown and fully armed.

So how did Athena come to be inside Zeus's skull? Well, Zeus had sex with Mētis, who was one of those feminine abstractions treated as goddesses — the embodiment of practical wisdom or cunning. Whatever she was, she didn't want to have sex with Zeus and kept changing shapes while he was at it. After he was done, his grandmother Gaia (or according to some sources, Prometheus) told him that after Mētis had the daughter he had impregnated her with, she'd have a son who would overthrow him and become king of heaven. So Zeus swallowed Mētis whole, and baby Athena gestated inside his head. So Athena (born out of Zeus' head) is a kind of parallel to the god Hephaestus (whom Hera made and bore all by herself). See Chapter 4 for Hephaestus's story.

TIP

Who came first, Athene or Hephaestus? Even the Greeks didn't agree. Some say that Hera made Hephaestus as revenge after Zeus produced Athena from his head. But some stories say that Hephaestus helped with Athena's birth by whacking Zeus on the head with an ax.

Athena is a goddess of war; she wears a helmet and breastplate and carries a shield with the head of Medusa on it. In addition to her shield, she has the considerable honor of carrying Zeus's *aegis,* which is like a poncho made of goatskin, with a fringe. That doesn't sound all that nice, but this particular aegis was more like a shield impervious to any weapon, even Zeus's own lightning.

Athena's symbols and nicknames

Among Athena's symbols is the owl representing her wisdom; an owl graced the silver coins of Athens, Athena's special city. She's also accompanied by her pet snake. Snakes are often symbols of powerful female divinities, and the Athenians believed that Athena's snake protected their city. And the most famous statue of Athena, in the Parthenon in Athens, showed her holding a tiny, winged Nike (goddess of victory) in her hand.

Like many of the other gods and goddesses, Athena has certain epithets. Here they are:

- **Pallas Athena:** Pallas is just a name; perhaps Pallas Athena represents the coming together of two really ancient goddesses into one.
- **Athena Parthenos:** Athena the Virgin. *Parthenon* means "Temple of the Virgin."
- **Gray-eyed:** Athena was famous for her wisdom and her gray eyes.
- **Aegis-bearing Athena:** Because she carried Zeus's aegis.
- **Athena Polias:** Athena who protects the city (*polis* in Greek).

» **Athena Pronaos:** In Delphi, a statue of Athena sat in front of the temple of Apollo, so visitors to Delphi would offer sacrifices to Athena Pronaos, or Athena-in-Front-of-the-Temple.

Her pet city, though, is Athens (which is obviously named after her). She protected the city, encouraged crafts and agriculture, and taught humans to tame wild horses. Athena's temple in Athens is the famous Parthenon on the Acropolis.

Athena's influence

Athena pops up all the time in the course of Homer's poem the *Odyssey*. Athena also helped Perseus in his quest to kill Medusa, lending him her shiny shield so that he could see to cut off the Gorgon's head without looking straight at her and turning to stone.

Athena, for all her wisdom and power, could also be vain. In one story, Athena gave music a shot, trying to learn to play the double-flute. But after she caught a glimpse of her reflection with her cheeks all puffed out, she threw away the instrument in disgust. Marsyas, son of Olympus, picked them up and engaged in a musical contest with Apollo, the results of which we detail in Chapter 4.

Artemis, the pretty huntress

Artemis is Apollo's twin sister, the daughter of Zeus and the Titan Leto. Of course, Hera is Zeus' legitimate wife, and she is not pleased to see Leto pregnant with twins. Hera chases Leto — who is already in labor! — all around the world. Finally, Leto finds refuge on the island of Delos, where the people hide her until she has her babies. Leto has Artemis first, and (right to work) Artemis then helps her mother give birth to her own twin, Apollo.

In the *Iliad*, Artemis heavily favors the Trojan side, and she demands that Agamemnon sacrifice his young daughter Iphigenia. In Sparta, she took charge of men's transition to adulthood and handled hunting and some aspects of war.

In some stories, Artemis is the goddess who pulls the moon across the sky every night. The moon goddess is also sometimes called Selene, the sister of Helios, the sun god, with whom Apollo is sometimes confused.

The outdoorsy type: Artemis's symbols and epithets

Artemis loved the woods and wild animals; in fact, she watched over young animals. She's the goddess of the hunt and carried her bow and arrows everywhere.

Artemis is a very important goddess. She presided over women's transitions — from virgin to adult woman and from woman to mother, helping women give birth and raise their children. Ironically, the Greeks often referred to Artemis, a protector of women, as one who brings death to women. Sometimes the death is sudden, and sometimes it is described as peaceful. This may refer to cancers or diseases particular to women, or death during childbirth.

Artemis's symbols are the moon (because she's sister to Apollo, the sun god, and because she was associated with women's monthly cycles), the stag (because of her perpetual hunting), and the cypress tree.

Artemis is a complicated goddess, worshipped for different things in different places. Sometimes she represents feminine things; other times she sides with masculine things. A short list of her many epithets shows how varied people's impressions of Artemis were.

- Child-rearer
- Friend of Youth, of Good Fame
- Horsefinder
- Huntress
- Lady of the Lake
- Light-bringing
- Of Persuasion
- Saviour
- Wolfish

REMEMBER

This list is by no means exhaustive — none of the lists of epithets for gods in this book is — and it especially excludes epithets that merely identify Artemis with particular places, like Persian Artemis, Mysian Artemis, and so on.

Oh, I'll just have to kill you

Artemis isn't a goddess anyone wanted to cross. Whenever she got mad, her revenge was swift and straightforward. Niobe, queen of Thebes, had seven sons and seven daughters and made the mistake of bragging that she was better than Leto, who only had two children. Artemis killed all the girls and Apollo killed all the boys, and then Niobe had none.

Acteon was a hapless hunter who was strolling through the woods with his dogs, minding his own business, when he happened upon a woodland pond. Unfortunately for him, Artemis was bathing nude in that pond. Furious that Acteon had

seen her without her clothes on, she turned him into a stag. His own hunting dogs ripped him apart.

Hestia, goddess of good fire

Hestia, the firstborn daughter of Cronos and Rhea, is the goddess of the hearth. She is generally included among the 12 Olympians. The hearth was the center of the home, so Hestia had authority over the home, and by extension the family and the entire community. She was very important to the Greek people and also to the Romans in her later incarnation as Vesta. (The Roman priestesses of Hestia/Vesta were the "Vestal Virgins"; see Chapter 9.)

REMEMBER

Because the hearth was the symbolic heart of the home, families made daily offerings to Hestia, kind of like saying grace before meals. Rituals around the hearth initiated new members of the family — brides, babies, and slaves, mostly — into the household.

Each city in Greece had a public hearth dedicated to Hestia where the fire was never allowed to go out. In fact, the sacred hearth may actually have defined a city; Theseus (according to Athenian myth) was unifying the territory of Attica and making all the independent villages part of a larger city of Athens by removing all the village public hearths until only one was left in Athens.

Ideas, Powers, and Virtues: Some More Abstract Goddesses

In the Greek language, abstract ideas — strife, necessity, victory, peace, madness — are grammatically feminine. In Greek literature, these abstract ideas are often mentioned as though they're gods, or actually, goddesses. The following sections outline a few.

Strife (Eris)

Eris means "strife" in Greek, and because strife is a powerful actor in human affairs, it was only reasonable to speak of it as a divinity. That's why the poet Hesiod begins his poem *Works and Days* by saying that two kinds of strife are found among people:

- The bad kind, which causes wars
- The good kind, which causes free enterprise

But he talks about Strife (Eris) as if she were a goddess.

In the Trojan War myth, Eris (Strife) definitely *is* a goddess. She's the one who wasn't invited to the wedding of Peleus and Thetis and, with the golden apple, started the whole war (see Chapter 7 for more).

Victory (Nike)

Another abstract idea that appears as a concrete goddess is Victory, which is *Nike* in Greek (and which rhymes with "spiky"). A temple honoring Nike appears on the Acropolis in Athens. Representations of Athena often show her holding a tiny Nike goddess in her hand.

Nike often had wings, except at Athens. The Athenians were especially fond of their Wingless Victory because she couldn't fly away!

Wisdom (Sophia)

This Greek tendency didn't end with the rise of Christianity, either. The great Christian church of Constantinople is called *Hagia Sophia,* or "The Church of Holy Wisdom" ("wisdom" in Greek is *Sophia*), yet another example of a feminine abstraction turning up as a Greek divinity.

Goddess Gangs: A Motley Crew

Some of the more minor goddesses appear in teams, such as the nine Muses (*Mousai* in Greek), the three Graces (*Charites*), the three Fates (*Moirai*), and varying numbers of Furies (*Erinyes*). The tendency toward groups or even multiples of three is probably no accident. Three seems to be important in many cultures.

Muses

The *Muses* are the daughters of Zeus and the goddess Mnemosyne, or Memory. They handle artistic endeavors for poets and other artists and were popular subjects for sculptors. These inspiring ladies include the following:

- **Polyhymnia:** The sponsor of hymns to the gods
- **Urania:** The Muse of astronomy
- **Calliope:** The Muse of epic poetry

- **Thalia:** The Muse of comedy
- **Terpsichore:** The Muse of choral singing (lyric poetry) and dancing
- **Clio:** The Muse of history
- **Euterpe:** The Muse of flute playing
- **Melpomene:** The Muse of tragedy
- **Erato:** The Muse of poetry not accompanied by dancing, specially love poetry — hence her name

Various sources differ regarding the precise number of Muses and their specific areas of responsibility.

All epic poets claim that their inspiration comes from the Muses. Homer's first words in the *Iliad* are "Sing, Goddess, of the wrath of Achilles," and no doubt this "goddess" is a Muse. He opens the *Odyssey* with "Muse, tell me about a man of many ways. . . ." The Roman poet Virgil is a little more self-centered. His *Aeneid* begins "I sing of arms and of a man. . . ." and he gets around to invoking the Muses only later. See Chapter 10 for more on Virgil.

Graces

The three *Graces* are the daughters of Zeus and Eurynome, the daughter of the Titan Oceanus. They bring grace and beauty everywhere they go, and no party was complete without them. They're closely associated with Aphrodite. Here they are:

- **Aglaia:** The Grace of splendor or radiance.
- **Euphrosyne:** The Grace of joy and mirth.
- **Thalia:** The Grace of good cheer (and flowering). She has same name as Thalia the Muse but is a different goddess.

The Graces, as shown in Figure 5-2, liked poetry, singing, and dancing, and sometimes performed at divine weddings. They made flowers grow, especially roses. They could bestow all kinds of beauty and charm, including physical, moral, and artistic.

The singular of "Grace" in Greek is *Caris,* still a popular name.

FIGURE 5-2: Three graceful Graces.

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Fates

The *Fates* are the daughters of Zeus and Themis (or of Zeus and Night). The Fates decide the course of every person's life from birth to death by spinning thread, which symbolizes the person's life. The concept of fate (and in turn, the Fates) was very important in Greek culture and myth. Even Zeus, king of the gods, is bound by fate. (See Chapter 4 for details.)

Here are the Fates along with their specialties:

- **Clotho (Spinner and Twister):** She spins the thread and is depicted as a beautiful young woman.
- **Lachesis (the Lot Caster):** She determines the course of a person's life. She's a middle-aged woman.
- **Atropos (The Unyielding One):** This dreaded lady cuts the thread with her scissors, ending the person's life. She's an old hag.

TIP

In Disney's movie *Hercules*, all the Fates are depicted as old women. But for the Greeks, only Atropos, the Unyielding One, is said to be very old.

REMEMBER

The image of a person's fate as a piece of string is important. In Homer's poetry, a person's fate clearly seems to determine when they'll die, but it doesn't determine what happens in the meantime. Folks die when they get to the end of their string, and that's that. So the Trojan warrior Hector can tell his wife, "Don't worry! If today is my day to die, I'll die whether I stay home or go out and fight. If today isn't my day, I'll be perfectly safe in the middle of the battle." (See Chapter 7.)

Furies

The *Furies* sprang from the blood that fell into the sea when Cronos cut off Uranus's genitals (see Chapter 3). They're sometimes depicted with snakes for hair (like Gorgons, such as Medusa). They punished anyone who had incurred spiritual pollution (*miasma*), which included anyone who killed relatives, people in temples, or a host. They also protected beggars and assured the "natural order" of things, such as the birthright of an eldest son.

Although ancient stories differ on the number of Furies, the tragedian Aeschylus wrote a play about them, the *Eumenides,* which referred to just a whole bunch of Furies. Eventually, however, writers narrowed them down to these three:

- Tisiphone ("Avenger of Bloodshed")
- Allecto ("Relentless One")
- Megaera ("Grudge Bearer")

The Greeks believed in divine retribution and in the proper natural order of things; the Furies filled in the gaps when human law failed.

IN THIS CHAPTER

- Perusing the story of popular Perseus
- Following the life and Labors of Heracles
- Tracing the tale of Theseus
- Joining Jason's quest for the Golden Fleece

Chapter 6
So Fine and Half Divine: Heroes

The heroes of Greek mythology have left their mark all over Western culture. Everyone has heard of Hercules (or Heracles, as he's sometimes referred to), the strongest hero of all; he even had his own TV show and a movie by Disney.

Heroes are humans but larger than life. Most of them are sons of a god (usually Zeus) and a mortal woman, most of them are bigger and stronger than everyone else (a few are cleverer), and they all have adventures involving monsters, gods, and fantastic creatures. The Age of Heroes is (according to ancient Greek reckoning) the generation before the time of the Trojan War. (For details on the Trojan War, head to Chapter 7.) By our reckoning, that (fictional) war was around 1500–1200 BCE, otherwise known as the Bronze Age.

What makes a man a hero? Having a divine daddy is a start, but doing deeds beyond the ability of normal mortals really clinches it. Heroes aren't uniformly good people. Many of them murder innocent victims, and only a few of them know how to treat a woman right. Though they're often rulers, they aren't always very good at government, preferring to spend their time in heroic exploits.

THE SCOOP ON THE SOURCES

We mention several writers who are the sources of these myths. Pausanius lived during the second century CE, when the Greek world was under the rule of the Roman Empire; he was a travel writer and his book *Description of Greece* is much like a travel guide you may buy today. Apollodorus was a scholar in Alexandria in Egypt, during the second century BCE; he was, by specialty, a *mythographer,* or someone who collected and wrote down myths. Ovid was a Roman poet in the first century BCE whose famous long poem the *Metamorphoses* is full of myths (see Chapter 11). Herodotus was a Greek historian who lived in the fifth century BCE; he was smart enough to know that what people believe influences how they act, so he includes in his history many mythological stories. Why do scholars get Greek myths from Roman sources? The Romans loved Greek culture, and scholars have to work with what survives today.

This chapter describes four of the most important Greek heroes and why they're still remembered today. Perseus killed Medusa. Heracles was the biggest, strongest guy ever. Theseus killed the Minotaur and turned Athens into a great city-state. Jason led the Argonauts to the Golden Fleece. They all did great things, but they were only human, too. (Well, Heracles is complicated, but we get to that later.)

Perseus, a Real Prince of a Guy

Perseus is perhaps the most "heroic" of the Greek heroes, in the sense that he mostly did things such as kill monsters and rescue helpless maidens and then marry them, just like a prince in a fairy tale.

The story of Perseus was popular in ancient Greece. Homer called him the "most renowned of men." The Roman authors Apollodorus and Ovid told full-length versions of his tale, and Pausanius and Herodotus mentioned him. The Greek playwrights Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides wrote plays about him. Artists loved to depict him cutting off Medusa's head or with the beautiful Andromeda.

Perseus is one of Zeus's many sons. His mother was Danaë (pronounced *DAN-eye-ee*). She was the only child of King Acrisius of Argos. King Acrisius was weary of his daughter because a priestess at an oracle had told him his daughter would have a son who would kill him. (An *oracle* was a place where people could go to ask gods questions. For a fee, a priestess inhaled burning bay leaves to become inspired and blurted out vaguely worded predictions. They always came true, just like the insights from fortune cookies.)

An "oracle" was originally a place you went to ask questions of a god. As time went by, "oracle" came to refer to the answer that the priestess gave as well as the priestess herself. So you could go to an oracle to ask the oracle to give you an oracle. We talk about the most famous oracle, the one where Apollo answers questions, in Chapter 4.

Trying to change fate

You can't get around a prophecy, but Acrisius gave it his best shot. He shut Danaë in an underground house open only to the sky and had her guarded day and night. But that didn't stop Zeus; he visited her from the sky in the form of a shower of gold and impregnated her with Perseus. (The mechanics of this reproductive act aren't clear, but that's how the myth goes.)

Danaë had her baby and hid him from her father for a while, but eventually Acrisius discovered him. He refused to believe that Zeus was the father. More to the point, he didn't want the kid around to kill him one day. So he shut Danaë and the baby in a trunk and set it adrift on the sea, hoping to get rid of her for good without being personally responsible for her death. If he was questioned, "She was fine when I left her!" was his plan.

But Zeus made sure Danaë and their baby didn't die; he sent the chest with mother and child to an island beach, where a fisherman named Dictys found them and took them home with him.

Taking on a heroic quest

Danaë and Perseus lived with Dictys and his wife for years. Dictys's brother, Polydectes, was the ruler of the island. Around the time Perseus grew up, Polydectes noticed that Danaë still looked pretty good and decided that he must have her. Danaë didn't want anything to do with him, and her son would've thwarted any attempts to take her by force. So Polydectes decided he had to get rid of Perseus.

Polydectes came up with a rather far-fetched plan. He announced that he was getting married and invited all his friends, including Perseus. He told everyone to bring horses, which he was collecting as a bridal gift. Of course, Perseus, the shipwrecked son of a single mother, couldn't bring a horse as a present! But Polydectes knew that Perseus would have to salvage his pride some way, and the only thing a strong young man like him could do was to conduct some heroic exploit.

And that's exactly what Perseus did: He announced that he was going to go kill Medusa, one of the three *Gorgons*, or scary women with the hair of snakes. Perseus would bring back Medusa's head as a gift, despite the fact that anyone who looked at Medusa's face turned to stone. The king was more than happy to give his

approval to this suicide mission — in fact, the writer Apollodorus says Polydectes ordered him to go.

Getting by with a little help from his (divine) friends

Polydectes expected that Perseus would get himself killed trying to bring back Medusa's dangerous head, and then Danaë would be all his. Things didn't turn out as expected.

Eventually, Hermes (Zeus's personal assistant and errand-boy) and Athena stepped in to get things going. They told Perseus that if he wanted to kill Medusa, first he needed to get some equipment from the nymphs of the North. And the only people who knew where the nymphs lived were the Gorgons' sisters, the *Graiai* or *Gray Women.* (They're three old women with gray hair who looked like swans with human heads, hands, and arms under their wings. They share one eye that they take turns using.) Hermes offered to take Perseus to the Gray Women; he was probably worried that Perseus would never find them on his own.

First, Hermes gave Perseus a magical sword that wouldn't break on the Gorgon's scaly neck. Athena lent Perseus her highly polished bronze shield. She told him he could use it as a mirror so that he could attack Medusa without actually looking at her. (Looking into the Gorgon's eye would turn him to stone.) Perseus took his gifts, and he and Hermes set off together to find the Gray Women.

Perseus waited until he saw one of the Gray Women take the eye out of her head and pass it to her sister; then he jumped up and grabbed it. He told them that they could have their eye back as soon as they told him how to find the nymphs of the North. Panicked (and blind) they turned over the info right away. Returning the eye, Perseus and Hermes set off again.

TIP

Disney's movie *Hercules* mixes up the Fates (see Chapter 5) and the *Graeae* by having the Fates share an eye.

This time, Perseus arrived at the charmed land of the *Hyperboreans* (a name that means "People who live really far north" and sometimes refers to the inhabitants of Britain). It was an earthly paradise of feasts, music, and dancing. The Hyperboreans gave him three gifts:

- Winged sandals
- A cap to make him invisible
- A bag that would hold whatever was put in it, no matter what size it was

Hermes actually knew where the Gorgons lived, and he and Perseus flew over the ocean to their island, where Athena met them. The three monsters were asleep, and Perseus took a good look at them in the reflection on his shield. Athena told him which one was Medusa. Helpful, because only Medusa could be killed; the other two Gorgons were immortal. Perseus flew over her on his winged sandals, chopped off her head (Athena helped him aim), swooped down to grab it, and dropped it into his magic bag. Figure 6-1 shows Perseus and Medusa, but don't be afraid to look. The other two Gorgons woke up and tried to get him, but Perseus put on his cap of invisibility and flew away safely.

FIGURE 6-1: Perseus holding Medusa's Head.

Finding true love and another battle

Perseus flew through Ethiopia in Africa on the way home. There he found Andromeda, a beautiful maiden about to be eaten by a sea monster.

Why she is about to be eaten is another story. Queen Casseiopeia boasted that she and her daughter Andromeda were more beautiful than the daughters of the sea god. So the angry deity sent the sea monster to the coast of Ethiopia, where it terrorized the people by eating them. An oracle said that the only way to make it go away was for Casseiopeia's daughter to be given to the monster, so Andromeda's dad chained her to a rock and waited for the monster to eat her.

For the Greeks, Ethiopia — *Aithiopeia*, which means "place where the people's faces shine" — was the entire African continent south of Egypt and Libya. You can read about the great hero Memnon, King of Ethiopia and son of the goddess Dawn, in Chapter 7.

Perseus instantly fell in love with Andromeda. He waited for the sea monster to surface and then cut off its head. Perseus took Andromeda back home and asked her parents whether he could marry her. They said yes. Of course, a girl like Andromeda hadn't gone unnoticed before, and she already happened to be engaged to a guy named Phineas. Phineas plotted against Perseus, but Perseus gave the Medusa head a tryout and turned his rival to stone. Then he married the princess.

Stoning the king

Perseus and his bride sailed back to his island home. They discovered that his mother had rejected Polydectes's advances, and she and Dictys had run away to hide. Some accounts say they hid at the altars of the gods where no harm could come to them. Meanwhile, Polydectes was having a party with all his buddies that evening. Perseus walked into the banquet hall, announced that he'd brought the promised bride-gift, pulled out Medusa's head, and turned Polydectes and his cronies to stone. Dictys became king of the island.

Catching up with granddad (and fate)

Perseus heard about a track meet that was being held in Larissa. Having nothing else to do, he decided to participate. As it happened, his grandfather Acrisius (whom the oracle had predicted Perseus would kill) had come to watch the same event. Perseus accidentally threw the discus into the stands, where it hit his grandfather on the foot and killed him, just as the oracle had said so many years ago. And no, we don't know how getting hit on the foot can kill someone instantly — maybe he had a heart attack?

Pausanias tells a different version: Perseus had gone to Larissa looking for his grandfather to make up with him. He decided to give a little discus display, and Acrisius accidentally walked into the path of the discus.

Perseus and Andromeda lived happily ever after. They had a son named Electryon, who became Heracles' grandfather. Perseus gave Medusa's head to Athena. She put it onto her *aegis* (see Chapter 5) so she could turn people to stone whenever she wanted.

REMEMBER

Irony (defined by the ancient Greeks as the conflict between what *seems* to be true, or a good idea, versus what *is* true, or a good idea) plays a critical role in many Greek myths and stories based on them. The clearest description of this kind of irony, beloved by the Greeks, comes from the movie *Kung Fu Panda*, where Master Oogway says, "One often meets his destiny on the road he takes to avoid it." Flip to Chapter 8 for some Greek tragedies that rely heavily on irony for their plots.

Heracles, a Box Office Gold of the Ancients

Heracles, better known these days as Hercules (his Roman name), is the mightiest of the mighty. He's strong and sexy and knows that he's hotter than any other guy. He usually relies on brute strength (who cares about brains when you're the hugest?), but occasionally he displays flashes of brilliance, such as when he persuaded two rivers to divert their courses into the Augean stables (as we describe in the later section "The 12 Labors of Heracles").

Heracles (shown in Figure 6-2) was *extremely* popular with the ancient Greeks. Homer mentioned him, and storytellers constantly added to his legend. Apollodorus, Pausanius, and historian Herodotus all wrote a ton of stuff about him. The Greeks worshipped their mythological heroes with small *hero shrines.* Heracles had more shrines than any other hero, maybe because he dedicated his life to useful work and suffered a great deal while helping people.

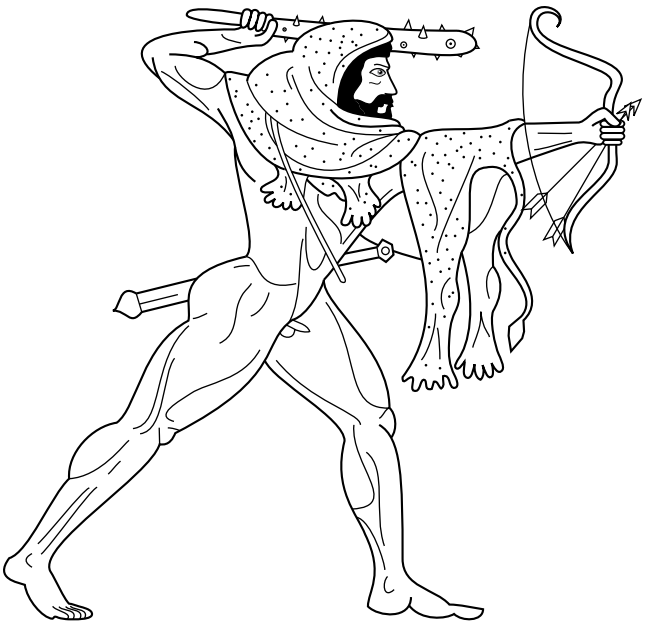

FIGURE 6-2: Heracles showing his distinctive club, lion skin, and bow.

Mommy Issues: Heracles's origin story

Zeus had gotten the hots for a woman named Alcmena and disguised himself as her husband so she'd have sex with him. Alcmena got pregnant and had twin boys. One was her husband's (human) child, and the other was Heracles.

Zeus's jealous wife, Hera, had it in for Heracles all his life. (The name "Heracles" means "Fame of Hera" or "Famous because of Hera.") When Heracles was a baby, Hera sent two snakes to kill him in his crib. Little Heracles grabbed each one around the neck and strangled them; his mother rushed in to find her toddler laughing with two dead snakes in his hands.

When Heracles was 18, he killed the Thespian lion, whose skin he wore as a cloak for the rest of his life. (Or maybe he got the skin from the Nemean lion, who he killed as the first of his 12 labors; see the next section for that story.) He then fought and destroyed the Minyans, who had been demanding tribute from Thebes. The grateful citizens gave him a princess for a wife. He had three sons with her, but one day Hera made him go crazy and kill his wife and children. Hera drove him crazy either because she was just plain mean or because she'd arranged for him to receive an oracle ordering him into service, and he was so mad at having to leave his new family that he went nuts and killed them.

Regardless, he was filled with guilt and went to the oracle at Delphi to find out what he could do for penance. (We cover the Oracle at Delphi in Chapter 4.) The priestess there told him to go to Eurystheus, king of Mycenae, and do whatever he demanded.

The 12 Labors of Heracles

Eurystheus was thrilled to have a big, strong slave, although he was a little scared of Heracles. He told Heracles that he had to do 10 seemingly impossible tasks, which Heracles was glad to do as penance for killing his family. The 10 turned into 12 because Eurystheus disqualified Heracles on 2 of them. Some of the tasks seem to have had a point — killing a dangerous monster or cleaning a nasty stable — but some seem mainly to have been efforts to get Heracles killed. He performed these tasks in a certain order, so we number them here in their correct sequence:

1. The *Nemean Lion* was impervious to weapons; Heracles choked it to death.
2. The *Lernian Hydra* had nine heads and grew two new ones whenever one was cut off. Heracles cauterized each neck with a burning torch as he removed the heads, and then buried the last, immortal one under a rock. He dipped his arrows into the Hydra's poisonous blood to make them more deadly. Unfortunately for Heracles, Iolaus, his charioteer (in those days, the charioteer was a near and dear friend), had helped him kill the Hydra, and Eurystheus said that didn't count.

3. The *Cerynitian hind* (a hind is a kind of female deer) had horns of gold and was sacred to Artemis. Heracles spent a year catching it and bringing it back alive.
4. Heracles trapped a great boar on Mount Erymanthus in the snow.
5. The stables of Augeus (also called the "Augean stables") hadn't been cleaned in years. So much manure! Heracles diverted the courses of two nearby rivers through the stables and cleaned them in a single day. He accomplished this feat with a lot of digging and by buying the rivers' cooperation with a gift. But Heracles had asked Augeus for payment for completing this task, and Eurystheus wouldn't accept it as one of the labors.
6. He flushed out the Stymphalian birds by clattering bronze castanets that Athena gave him and shot the birds with arrows.
7. He caught King Minos's bull in Crete and brought it back to Mycenae in a boat.
8. He killed King Diomedes of Thrace, who had a nasty reputation as a cruel ruler, and stole his man-eating mares.
9. Heracles was ordered to bring back the girdle (belt, really) of Hippolyta, a fearsome warrior and queen of the Amazons. Heracles' epic feat here was to say, "Would you please give me your belt?" And she said, "Yes!" Typically, Heracles then killed her because of a misunderstanding: Hera, always hateful, made the Amazons think he was threatening Hippolyta so they'd attack him, and he assumed instead that Hippolyta had told them to do it. Heracles is a "shoot first and ask questions later" kind of guy.
10. He brought back the cattle of *Geryon,* a three-bodied monster on a western island. On the way there, he set up the *Pillars of Hercules* at the end of the Mediterranean: Gibraltar and Ceuta. This labor would've been his last, but Eurystheus disqualified the second and fifth tasks, so Heracles had to do two more.
11. The Golden Apples of the Hesperides proved to be a problem. Heracles went to Atlas and agreed to hold up the sky while Atlas went to get the apples for him. (As we note in Chapter 3, when Zeus conquered the Titans, he punished Atlas by making him hold the sky on his back forever.) Atlas got the apples but was going to leave Heracles holding up the sky. (Poor Atlas thought he was clever!) But Heracles said, "Okay, but hold the sky for a minute while I put a pad on my head." Of course, as soon as Atlas took the sky back, Heracles was outta there!
12. For his last labor, Heracles went to the underworld and retrieved Hades's three-headed dog, Cerberus. Eurystheus then decided he didn't want the dog and had Heracles carry it back.

Finally, Heracles was finally free of his obligations to Eurystheus.

The sneaky centaur and the tragic mix-up

Heracles loved the ladies (he once slept with 50 sisters in 50 days!), and this proclivity was his downfall. He'd married a second time to a woman named Deianira. He got a *centaur* — someone with the body of a horse and the upper body of a human — named Nessus to ferry his bride across a river. (Heracles, to save ferry fare, swam across himself.) Nessus tried to rape Deianira after they were on the other side. She screamed, and Heracles shot the centaur from across the river with an arrow. But to get his revenge in the future, the dying Nessus told Heracles's wife to save some of his blood and the semen he'd spilled, mix them together, and use it as a charm if her husband ever fell in love with another woman.

One day, Heracles defeated a king named Eurytus. He'd had it in for this guy since right after finishing his 12 labors and thought he was going to get to marry Eurytus' daughter, Iole; he'd won her in an archery contest. Her brother cancelled the wedding, so Heracles went to war with Eurytus, killed him and his sons, and took Iole captive.

He sent his herald home to ask his wife, Deianira, to send him a nice robe to wear to make his sacrifices. The herald told Deianira about Iole. Deianira, who'd just been asked to send nice clothes because her husband had a new girlfriend, thought this was a good moment for using her love charm. She smeared it on the robe and sent it off.

As soon as Heracles put on the robe, he felt like his skin was burning — Nessus's blood was in the robe, and Heracles had killed Nessus with arrows dipped in the Hydra's poisonous blood. The poisoned blood robe did its work. Heracles tore off the robe, which stuck to him and took his skin with it. But he knew he was dying.

Heracles built a funeral pyre, got on top, and told his companions to light it. As the fire burned, a clap of thunder sounded, and Heracles went to live with the gods. Hera finally made up with him and gave him her daughter Hebe as a wife. Deianira, who thought she'd given her husband a love potion rather than a deadly poison, hanged herself when she heard what had happened.

Theseus, a Home-Grown Hero

Theseus is the mythological founder-hero of the great city of Athens. The Athenians believed he set them on the course to being a democratic world power and center of culture. Theseus, for them, represented cleverness, skill in negotiation, courage, justice, and protection of the oppressed.

They saw Theseus as a strong, fair ruler presiding over a democracy. His story is a good example of a myth that collected lots of events and consolidated them into one neat package. Although turning Athens into a great power probably took years and many leaders, crediting Theseus with everything was very simple and satisfying. Theseus also illustrates how being an utterly irresponsible jerk didn't disqualify someone from hero status.

Theseus is the son of Aegeus, king of Athens, and a woman in a small town in southern Greece who evidently wasn't married to him. Aegeus returned to Athens before his son was born. But before he left, he hid a sword and a pair of shoes under a stone and told Theseus's mother that when the boy was strong enough to roll away the stone and find the things beneath it, he could come to Athens and claim Aegeus as his father.

Theseus grew up big and strong, and one day his mom told him about the stone. He tried and tried to lift it, although it was really too heavy for anyone, even a strapping young hero. Finally, he devised a rope-and-pulley arrangement and retrieved his dad's old shoes and sword. Evidently, Aegeus didn't want to see his son unless the kid had problem-solving skills! His mother tried to get him to take a boat to Athens (the quick and safe way), but Theseus thought walking overland would give him more opportunity for heroics. So he set off on foot.

Greece in this mythological age was a scary, uncivilized place, full of outlaws and bandits. Theseus ran into several criminals and in each case gave them a taste of their own medicine. Here are a few of the scoundrels he used to make his own adventure flicks:

- Sinis had been fastening people to two pine trees bent to the ground and letting the trees go. He died that same way at Theseus's hands.
- The bandit Sciron had been making people kneel to wash his feet and then kicking them over a cliff; Theseus kicked him over.
- Procrustes fitted his victims to an iron bed by either stretching them on a rack or cutting off their legs. After he met Theseus, Procrustes himself was the last one to lie on that bed.

News of Theseus's deeds preceded him to Athens, and when he arrived, he received a hero's welcome. King Aegeus, unaware that Theseus was his son, invited him to a banquet. Aegeus actually planned to poison him out of fear that the people would make the heroic, dashing Theseus their king. Even in the "old days" when Athens had a king, he had to pay attention to the will of the people.

The witchy Medea (see the section "Jason the Jerk" later in this chapter) happened to be at Aegeus's court; she handed Theseus a cup of poisoned wine. At the

same moment Theseus drew his sword so that Aegeus would know who he was. (Or Aegeus happened to look right then at the sword hanging at Theseus's side.) Regardless, Aegeus saw the sword, threw the poison on the ground, and proclaimed Theseus his son and heir. Medea ran away to Asia.

Conquering the Minotaur and Daedalus's labyrinth

Aegeus had been having trouble with King Minos of the island of Crete. Athens had lost a war with Crete a few years before, and now Crete demanded a yearly tribute of seven girls and seven boys.

These kids were thrown into the *Labyrinth,* a vast maze built by the genius inventor Daedalus in Crete, for the Minotaur to devour.

Theseus had arrived in Athens just in time for the yearly tribute ship to sail. He offered to be one of the young men, seeing it as a heroic opportunity to kill the Minotaur and end Athens's subordination to Crete.

When the young Athenians arrived in Crete, their hosts marched them into the Labyrinth. Minos's daughter, Ariadne, saw Theseus and fell in love with him. She went to the wise Daedalus, something of a hero in his own right, and asked him to help her get Theseus out of the Labyrinth. Daedalus told her to give Theseus a ball of string that he could fasten one end of to the Labyrinth's door and unwind as he went.

Ariadne met with Theseus and promised to help him escape if he promised to take her to Athens and marry her. Of course, he agreed, and she gave him the ball of string. He tied it to the door and then ventured into the Labyrinth in search of the Minotaur. He found the monster sleeping and killed it with his bare hands. Theseus and his fellow Athenians then fled the Labyrinth, picked up Ariadne, jumped into their ship, and set sail back for Athens.

On the way home they stopped at the island of Naxos, where Theseus left Ariadne, although why isn't exactly clear. Some sources say a storm carried his ship away, and he was heartbroken; others say he abandoned her, and the wine god Dionysus married her instead.

Theseus's father had asked him to hoist a white sail if he was safe (the tribute boat generally used a black one). Theseus forgot and left the black sail up. As Theseus's ship approached Athens, Aegeus saw the black sail and, filled with grief over his son's death, jumped off a cliff into the sea.

REMEMBER

Even today, the sea that surrounds Athens between Greece and Turkey is called the Aegean Sea in honor of Aegeus.

Revamping Athens: A commonwealth under new management

Theseus was now king of Athens. He decided that he'd prefer a people's government where all citizens were equal, so he turned Athens into a commonwealth where all the little villages in the territory of Attica became part of the Athenian state. All with Theseus himself as commander-in-chief, of course. Athens prospered under his leadership, and he was a good friend to his contemporaries such as Oedipus (see Chapter 8) and Heracles.

He attacked the Amazons and married their queen, Hippolyta. They had a son named Hippolytus. The Amazons invaded Athens to rescue Hippolyta, and Theseus defeated them; no other enemy tried to take Athens for the rest of his life.

TECHNICAL STUFF

As the earlier section "The 12 Labors of Heracles" explains, Heracles killed Hippolyta. So how could Theseus marry her? Well, because she wasn't dead when Theseus met her. Myths are like that; stories don't fit together perfectly. Some sources, however, say that Theseus married a woman named Antiope, who may have been Hippolyta's sister.

Marrying Phaedra and burying Hippolytus

Theseus, like all heroes, had more than his share of love interests. He kidnapped Helen of Troy when she was still a child; her brothers Castor and Pollux rescued her before any damage was done.

Later, he married Ariadne's sister Phaedra; this marriage was a political union to firm up relations between Athens and Crete.

Phaedra fell in love with Theseus's son, Hippolytus. Hippolytus had absolutely no interest in women and was disgusted at the thought of getting together with his stepmother. Phaedra, consumed with shame, killed herself but left a note for Theseus claiming that Hippolytus tried to rape her.

Theseus banished his son, who wrecked his chariot and was mortally wounded. The goddess Artemis then told Theseus that Phaedra had lied in her note, and he forgave Hippolytus before the boy died.

Ending the exploits of a hero

A few years after his son's death (see the preceding section), Theseus was visiting his friend Lycomedes. Somehow, and for some reason, his host threw him off a cliff and killed him. Perhaps Lycomedes was jealous of Theseus's fame and achievements or feared the people would like him better. Or perhaps it was a favor to another king, Menestheus. (The Greek writer Plutarch suggests Theseus may have accidentally slipped and fallen.) The Athenian people built a magnificent tomb for him and made it a sanctuary for the poor.

Jason the Jerk

Jason is most famous for leading the Argonauts on the quest for the Golden Fleece (explained in the following section). It's one of Western civilization's quintessential adventure stories. Jason's also a lousy husband and father.

REMEMBER

Jason's wife, Medea, is a witch, and she became a model for the evil witches who appear in later fairy tales.

The third-century poet Apollonius of Rhodes wrote a long poem telling about the quest for the Golden Fleece. Pindar and Ovid also told the story. The fifth-century playwright Euripides wrote a play all about Jason and Medea called (appropriately) *Medea.*

The Golden Fleece and the Argonauts

Long ago, a Greek king was going to sacrifice his son Phrixus to save his people from a famine. But when the boy was on the altar about to be killed, Hermes sent a ram with a *fleece* (that is, the wool of a sheep) of pure gold to pick up him and his sister, Helle, and carry them to safety. As the ram was crossing the water between Europe and Asia, Helle fell off and drowned. That strait now bears her name: the Hellespont. Phrixus landed in the country of Colchis in modern Turkey, and its king, Aetes, took him in. Phrixus sacrificed the ram to Zeus and gave its golden fleece to King Aetes.

Now, back to Greece. Pelias was king of the city of Iolchus, on the northeastern Greek coast. He was also Jason's uncle. An oracle had told Pelias that he'd die at the hands of a kinsman wearing one shoe, so when Jason walked in one day a shoe down, it looked like he'd be the one. (Jason had lost the other shoe helping a goddess cross a stream.) Jason said he'd come to claim the throne. Pelias told him that

he'd give up the kingdom if Jason would go to Colchis and bring back the Golden Fleece (now a proper noun).

To help him with this task, Jason summoned all the most famous heroes of Greece, including the following:

- Heracles
- Castor
- Pollux
- Orpheus
- Achilles's father, Peleus
- Atalanta
- A few other idle heroes with nothing better to do

They all set sail in a ship called the *Argo* and called themselves the *Argonauts.* The goddess Hera helped them along the way. They had many adventures en route to Colchis: Heracles left the company when his boyfriend Hylas drowned. The Argonauts fought the *Harpies*, disgusting woman-birds who spoiled their food and left behind a foul stench. They just barely got their boat through the *Symplegades*, two rocks that repeatedly banged together; they timed the opening by letting a dove fly through first, and then rowed as fast as they could. They sailed past the Amazons and saw Prometheus chained to his rock (which we describe in Chapter 3). No wonder Jason repeatedly lost his nerve and had to be encouraged by his shipmates. Finally, they arrived in Colchis, land of the Golden Fleece.

A WORD ABOUT. . . UH. . . SEX

Greek myths are full of sex. Gods, goddesses, women, men, young and old, willing or unwilling, within marriage or extra-marital. It can seem shocking to modern people. But then, as now, sex is central to human experience and is therefore a natural topic for myths to address. On the matter of *sexuality*, the ancient (pre-Christian) Greeks had a different understanding, from that of most modern societies. For one thing, people didn't assume a sexual orientation as part of their identity. Heracles, for example, was famous for his sexual exploits with women, but he also had a young male lover, Hylas. Achilles (see Chapter 7) has a very close relationship with his fellow warrior Patroclus. Zeus, seducer of many mortal and immortal women, had a sexual relationship with his male cup-bearer Ganymede. Many of these sexual relationships led to trouble, but not because they were same- or different-sex relationships, just because sex often leads to trouble.

Medea the witch: Self-starter, proactive, works late as needed

Hera knew Jason would need help getting the Fleece, so she had Aphrodite's son Eros make King Aetes's daughter Medea fall in love with the hero. (You can read about Eros's matchmaking in Chapter 5.) Medea was a sorceress, so her skills would be useful.

Jason and his friends introduced themselves to the king, who welcomed them and gave them dinner. Then Jason stated his business — he wanted the Golden Fleece. Aetes didn't want to hand it over, so he told Jason he could have it if he completed an impossible task: Put two bronze-hooved, fire-breathing bulls into a harness; plow a field; plant it with a dragon's teeth; and fight off the army of men that would immediately grow from the teeth. Jason said he'd give it a try.

Late-night meetings and invincible ointment

Medea visited Jason that night and gave him an ointment to smear on his body and weapons to make him invincible. She told him that if the dragon-teeth soldiers attacked, he should throw a stone into their midst so they'd fight each other rather than him. Jason promised to take her to Greece and be faithful to her forever.

The next day Jason presented himself before Aetes and all the spectators who had come to watch the stranger get killed attempting a suicidal task. Much to their surprise, Jason successfully completed the tasks, thanks to Medea's help and advice.

King Aetes wasn't pleased. He started thinking of other ways to get rid of Jason, but Medea ran and told the Argonauts they needed to take the Fleece and go before her father got to them.

Apparently blood isn't thicker than water . . .

A giant snake guarded the Golden Fleece. Medea put the snake to sleep with a magical charm, and Jason easily pulled the Fleece out of the tree where it hung. Then they dashed back to the Argo and rowed away as fast as they could. Medea's brother came after them, but she killed him, cut up his body, and tossed the pieces into the sea. Aetes stopped to collect the body parts, and Jason and Medea got away.

Behind every hero is a great witch

Back home in Greece, the Argonauts disbanded, and Jason and Medea took the Golden Fleece to Pelias. They discovered that Pelias had forced Jason's father to kill himself, and his mother had also died. Jason asked Medea to help him get revenge.

Medea told Pelias's daughters that she could make their father young again and illustrated her technique: She cut an old ram into pieces, boiled it in her cauldron, and uttered the magic words, and a baby lamb jumped out. Convinced, the daughters cut up their dad and cooked him. Then they looked for Medea to say the spell, but she was long gone and their father stayed dead. Jason had his revenge.

Jason trades up for a more royal model

Jason and Medea moved to Corinth and had two sons. They lived happily this way for some years, but one day Jason announced that he was going to marry the daughter of King Creon of Corinth. Marrying the Corinthian woman was a political move; Jason wanted royal children, and Medea's sons had no rights and weren't suitable heirs. The Corinthian king, nervous about Medea's magical powers and about her two sons, ordered her to leave the country with them. Jason now told her that she was too wild and dangerous for him and that it was her own fault she had to leave. However, great guy that he was, he said he'd generously asked the king to exile her instead of killing her. He was going to make sure she had plenty of money for her journey to wherever.

OLD HEROES INSPIRE MODERN IDEAS

Heroes live in English vocabulary: A *Herculean task* is a job that seems too huge for anyone to accomplish. The word *labyrinth,* a kind of maze, comes from the story of Theseus, as does the basis for the *Hunger Games* movies. Ariadne's thread, which guides Theseus out of the Labyrinth, was called a *clew* (the older English word for rope or thread). "Clew" turned into "clue," the thing that leads to the answer. Modern scuba divers who explore caves and the insides of wrecks follow Ariadne's and Theseus' lead in using a guide-rope to find their way to safety. The Argonauts ("sailors on the Argo") who went with Jason on the quest for the Golden Fleece inspired the word *astronaut* ("star sailor") and its Russian counterpart *cosmonaut* ("universe sailor"). The plot of Shakespeare's "A Midsummer Night's Dream" includes a version of the wedding Theseus and Hippolyta. These are just a few examples of how Greek myths and heroes stick around today.

Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned . . .

Medea tore into him, pointing out the many times she'd saved him. Jason refused to acknowledge that she'd done anything to help him, claiming that the gods had been on his side. Medea was angry now. So she killed his new bride by anointing a beautiful robe with poison and having her sons deliver it to her rival. When the bride put it on, her flesh melted away, and she dropped dead.

Then Medea made the most dreadful decision a mother can make. She knew that her boys would be defenseless without their father, and she couldn't bear to see them become slaves. So she killed them herself. Jason came looking for her, outraged that she'd killed his bride. He found his sons dead and Medea flying away in a chariot pulled by dragons.

IN THIS CHAPTER

- Examining the Trojan War and its cast of characters
- Fighting the Trojans in Homer's *Iliad*
- Mourning Achilles and infiltrating Troy with a horse
- Exploring with Odysseus in Homer's *Odyssey*

Chapter 7

The Trojan War, the *Iliad*, and the *Odyssey*

The ancient Greeks didn't have a holy book that told them what to believe. But they did have Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey,* two long poems about the Trojan War. These books weren't religious — though they contain lots of gods, prayers, and sacrifices — but that didn't matter. Just as Christians, Jews, and Muslims use their *Bible, Torah, Talmud,* and *Q'uran (Koran),* the Greeks used Homer's poetry to tell them who they were. If an ancient Greek person in the fifth or fourth century BCE had one book in the house, that book was probably one of Homer's poems. (Actually, the book hadn't been invented, so they would've had a bunch of rolled-up pieces of papyrus in a leather or wooden bucket.)

In this chapter, we give you the highlights of the *Iliad*, which details the Trojan War itself, and the *Odyssey*, which is about how the hero Odysseus spent ten years trying to get home after the war was over. This chapter takes you to the world of the beautiful Helen stolen from her husband, the mighty heroes Achilles and Patroclus, the Amazon warriors and the army of Ethiopia, the Trojan Horse, and the wily Odysseus and his encounters with monsters, witches, and seductresses.

REMEMBER

The Trojan War and the adventures of Odysseus were the most exciting stories of the ancient Greek world. These stories mostly come from Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, but several other authors fill in the gaps. Almost all ancient Greek and Roman people, educated or not, knew and loved these tales.

Setting the Stage: Events Leading to the Trojan War

Troy was a real city in the northwest corner of Turkey. The people of Troy were the *Trojans.* The Trojan War, however, is a mythological war between an alliance of Greeks and the Trojans (plus their allies). According to myth, the war lasted for ten years, and the poem *The Iliad* takes place in the ninth year of the war. So what sparked this epic war? The real question is *who* sparked the war. The following sections link together different pieces of Greek and Roman writing to get you the backstory on the Trojan War.

Determining the fairest of them all

Three generations of misery and bloodshed started because of a wedding planner's mistake. Someone failed to invite an important guest.

Peleus and Thetis were the parents of Achilles, the greatest hero of the Trojan War. Peleus, a mortal man, fell in love with the sea nymph Thetis, daughter of Zeus. Peleus had been on a number of adventures, including sailing with Jason and the Argonauts. (For that story, head to Chapter 6.) He had been married before, but that went sour when he accidentally killed his father-in-law. When he saw the goddess Thetis, he tried to kidnap her. She fought him off with a snake, but he eventually won her over, and Zeus consented to their marriage.

The wedding of Peleus and Thetis was a big affair; all the famous mortals and gods and goddesses came to Phthia in northern Greece (near Colchis, where Jason started his adventures). But Thetis, or whoever composed the guest list, had decided not to invite Eris, the goddess of Strife, hoping to avoid . . . well, strife. Of course that didn't work. Eris, insulted, snuck into the wedding reception and tossed a golden apple onto the dance floor. On the apple were the words *To the Fairest.*

The golden apple was a party-killer. Who was the fairest, the most beautiful? Clearly the great goddesses were the main competitors (you can read about them in Chapter 4):

- Athena, Zeus's daughter
- Hera, Zeus's wife and Queen of the Gods
- Aphrodite, the Goddess of Love

They asked Zeus to award the prize, but he was no fool and passed the decision off to a young man named Paris. Paris was the son of Priam, king of Troy. He got this dubious honor because Zeus knew that one, it would cause trouble and two, that Troy was fated to be destroyed.

Years earlier, the Trojan king Laomedon got into trouble with Apollo and Poseidon. These gods had agreed to build walls for Troy, but when the job was done, Laomedon refused to pay them. So Troy was doomed to fall, and Zeus chose Paris to judge among the three goddesses to get the ball rolling. In fact, when Paris was born, his mother had a dream that she'd given birth to a torch that was going to set the entire city on fire — the torch was, obviously enough, her baby Paris. The parents tried to get rid of their baby by leaving him in the wilderness, but little Paris survived for five days, and Priam gave in and took him back.

Like so many contests, this one immediately became corrupt. Each goddess tried to bribe Paris:

- Athena offered him victory in war.
- Hera offered him power over nations.
- Aphrodite offered him the most beautiful woman in the world.

Paris accepted Aphrodite's offer, only to discover that the most beautiful woman in the world was already married. She was Helen, daughter of the mortal woman Leda and Zeus (who visited Leda in the form of a swan — Helen was actually born out of an egg!). She was married to Menelaus, king of Sparta, so to collect his prize, Paris had to travel from Troy in Asia to Sparta in Greece and kidnap her.

Kidnapping Helen, the prettiest girl in the world

Paris already had a wife named Oenone (pronounced *Oy-no-nee*), who warned him not to go through with the kidnapping, but he didn't listen. He sailed off to Sparta to be a guest at the palace of Menelaus. While there, he did one of the following:

- Forcibly carried Helen off to Troy
- Seduced Helen, and they went off to Troy together

Now, one of Zeus's specific roles is Protector of Hospitality *(Zeus Xenios)*, and kidnapping/seducing your host's wife was certainly against the rules. So, if Troy hadn't been fated to be destroyed before, it definitely was now!

When Menelaus discovered that his wife had been kidnapped, he went running to his big brother, Agamemnon, king of Mycenae. Agamemnon agreed to get an expedition together and sail to Troy to wage war and get Helen back.

Because of this vast expedition to get her back, Helen is known as "the face that launched a thousand ships," a phrase that comes from a play written by the English poet Christopher Marlowe in the late 1500s. You can see where those ships sailed in Figure 7-1.

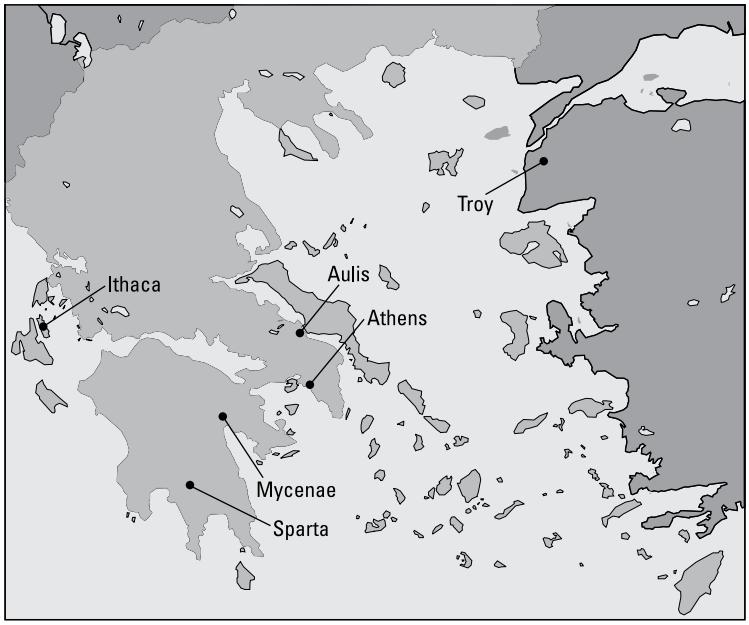

FIGURE 7-1: The area of the Mediterranean around the time of the Trojan War.

Agamemnon had one advantage as he planned his invasion: When Helen's father, Tyndareus (well, her supposed father, ignoring the Zeus-as-a-swan thing), had been planning her wedding, just about every bachelor in Greece had made him an offer for his daughter's hand. This situation looked as though it was going to be trouble, because Tyndareus ran the risk of gaining one son-in-law and a thousand bitter enemies regardless of whom he chose for his daughter. But clever Odysseus suggested that all the suitors promise the following:

- Not to kill the lucky fellow
- To help get Helen back if she should be kidnapped

In retrospect, this effort to avoid trouble led directly to a ten-year-long war that sent many souls of heroes flying down to Hades, so perhaps it wasn't such a good idea after all.

Unfortunately, now that Helen actually had been kidnapped, these guys weren't particularly enthusiastic about helping Menelaus! Odysseus, for example, pretended to be insane when the recruiter arrived to collect him; he hitched an ox and an ass to his plow and sowed his fields with salt. The recruiter stuck his baby son in front of the plow; Odysseus stopped short of plowing the kid and had to admit that he was sane and could go to war.

Hiding the hero Achilles

The marriage of Peleus and Thetis had worked out long enough for the two of them to have a son, Achilles. And there was a period of a couple of decades between the wedding and the Trojan War, time for Achilles to be born and grow to manhood, for Paris to steal Helen, and for the Greeks to organize an alliance to invade Troy.

Achilles's mother, Thetis, tried to keep her son out of the war. When Achilles was 9 years old, she heard from the prophet Calchas that Troy wouldn't be captured without him, so she tried to prevent the whole mess by hiding him. She sent Achilles to the palace of Lycomedes, where he spent several years dressed as and acting like a girl. Well, mostly. He did get the king's daughter pregnant, and she bore a son, Neoptolemus.

The Greeks sent Odysseus to Lycomedes's house to find Achilles. Odysseus evidently couldn't tell the real girls from Achilles in drag by looking, so he played a trick. One version of the story (the one in Ovid's *Metamorphoses;* see Chapter 11) says that Odysseus plunked down a basket full of pretty clothes mixed with armor and weapons. The girls all ran to check out the clothes, but Achilles was interested in the armor — busted!

Sacrificing Iphigenia, daughter of Agamemnon

Even when he did get his army together, Agamemnon's problems were far from over. As the Greeks got ready to board their ships, the winds began to blow, preventing the ships from sailing east across the Aegean Sea to Troy. Agamemnon

consulted the prophet Calchas, who said that these were winds sent by Artemis, who liked Troy and didn't like Agamemnon. The king could get the winds to stop, but only by offering his own daughter, Iphigenia, as a sacrifice to Artemis.

Agamemnon sent a message to his wife, Clytemnestra, saying that he had arranged for Iphigenia to marry Achilles. Mother and daughter packed up and traveled to Aulis, expecting a wedding. When they arrived, Agamemnon killed the girl on an altar, just like a sacrificial animal. The winds died down, and he was free to sail. With this horrible crime, the Trojan War was on. Clytemnestra harbored a grudge against her husband forever after; we cover Agamemnon's punishment in Chapter 8.

Lining up a cast of characters

REMEMBER

The important thing to keep in mind about the Trojan War is that the two sides are the Greeks and the Trojans. Both sides of the war have great heroes and memorable characters. Also note that for all the geographic diversity, all the heroes are really Greek, on both sides of the conflict. In the epic poems, the Greeks and Trojans are culturally identical: They speak the same language, worship the same gods, and have the same customs. There are famous and admired heroes on both sides of this war. The effect is that the Trojan War is more of a tragedy than a story of good guys fighting bad guys.

Greeks

The Greek heroes came from all over the Greek world — representatives from Mycenae, Sparta, Pylos, Crete, Thessaly, and a hundred other places. Homer lists them all, at great length in Book 2 of the *Iliad*, in the part known as the "Catalogue of Ships"; the list is so long that even Homer seems daunted as he starts it and calls on the Muse a couple of times during the course of the telling.

- **Agamemnon:** King of Mycenae, the leader of the Greeks.
- **Menelaus:** King of Sparta, the aggrieved husband of Helen. Menelaus is portrayed as something of a wimp (like his Trojan counterpart, Paris).
- **Achilles:** The "Best of the Achaeans." (In the *Iliad*, the Greeks are never called "Greeks," but are called "Achaeans" or "Danaans."
- **Patroclus:** Achilles's best friend.
- **Phoenix:** The old man who more or less raises Achilles while Peleus is busy being King of Phthia.
- **Odysseus:** The king of the island of Ithaca. The smartest of the Achaeans.

- **Ajax (his Greek name is Aias):** Big and dumb, but means well.
- **Diomedes:** An all-around hero. During the *Iliad,* because Achilles is sulking most of the time (as we explain later in the chapter), Homer uses Diomedes as a generic example of a perfect warrior.
- **Nestor:** The "Gerenian Horseman." No one knows what *Gerenian* means, not even ancient writers who wrote about the *Iliad.* Nestor is too old to fight but is full of advice and likes to tell long-winded stories about how cool he used to be.

Trojans

The Trojans, too, aren't all from Troy; many heroes come from other cities in Asia Minor. The following are the Trojans who figure largely in the *Iliad*. We talk about other Trojan allies in the later section "The Amazons and Africans."

- **Priam:** King of Troy, an old man.
- **Paris (also known as Alexandros, or Alexander):** Priam's son. Kidnapper of Helen and something of a wimp.
- **Hector:** Priam's other son. Definitely *not* a wimp. Everyone knows that only Hector can save Troy, but because everyone also knows that Troy is doomed, you know that Hector is doomed.
- **Andromache:** Hector's wife. Smart, strong, and tragic.
- **Aeneas:** A sort of typical warrior. In the *Iliad*, he's not very interesting, but he survives the war. He's made a legend in another epic, Virgil's *Aeneid* (named after him). For more on Aeneas, see Chapter 11.
- **Sarpedon:** One of the many illegitimate sons of Zeus and a powerful warrior.

The Trojan War, Nine Years Later: The *Iliad*

Homer's poem the *Iliad* (named for *Ilium*, another name for Troy) takes place during the ninth year of the Trojan War. The poem itself deals with events that happen over a short span of time — just a couple of weeks — during the war. The poem's reputation comes, in part, from the way it brings together events and themes from the war as a whole while focusing on the quarrel between Achilles and Agamemnon and the resulting tragedy of Hector.

Raids, plagues, and wounded pride

The Greeks had spent the previous eight years sacking neighboring cities for loot, captives, and entertainment. During one of these raids, Achilles led the Greeks to victory over the city of Chryse, where they took many of the women in town captive and divided them amongst themselves as war prizes.

When the *Iliad* opens, the Greeks are camped out on the beach a mile or so from the city, and the Trojans are safe behind their walls. An old man named Chryses, a priest of Apollo from Chryse, arrives at the Greek camp to try to buy back his daughter, Chryseis.

TECHNICAL STUFF

These names, by the way, aren't really names; they just mean "man from Chryse" and "daughter of Chryses." They're not important as individuals but as parts of the story.

Agamemnon had received the young woman Chryseis as his prize of battle, and he doesn't want to give her back. Agamemnon tells the old man to get lost and threatens to kill him if he ever comes back. Bad move — it *never* pays to get snappy with a priest of Apollo. Chryses prays to his patron, Apollo, who (outraged at this insult to his priest) sends a plague among the Greeks. The *Iliad* says that on the beach where the Greeks were camped "The dense funeral fires never stopped burning."

After the lethal plague has lasted nine days, the Greeks ask the prophet Calchas to explain what's going on. Calchas says that the only way to appease Apollo is to give the girl back. Agamemnon refuses, and he and Achilles get into an argument. Finally, Agamemnon agrees to give Chryseis back to her father to save the army but insists on taking Achilles's war-prize, a woman named Briseis, as a replacement. Achilles storms off in a huff and refuses to fight in the war. This conflict is where the wrath of Achilles gets its fuel and starts doing a good burn for the rest of the poem.

REMEMBER

Achilles is so mad because this "solution" is a slight to his honor. All the heroes want to collect as much honor as they can by fighting well or by giving good advice. Prizes (gold, silver, horses, captive women, and so on) are the visible symbols of that honor — they *are* the honor, in the heroes' eyes. So when Agamemnon takes Achilles's prize, he diminishes Achilles's honor to enhance his own. To make matters worse, Achilles's mother had told him that he was fated to have a short life, so he's in a hurry to collect as much honor as possible.

Achilles and his best bud change the tide

Achilles prays to his mother, Thetis, and asks her to convince Zeus to let the Trojans get the better of the fighting for a while, humiliating Agamemnon and highlighting Achilles' value to the Greek side. Thetis knows doing so will only cause trouble, but she agrees and convinces Zeus. While Achilles sulks, the Trojans and Greeks fight a savage battle between the beach and the city, which ends with the Greeks definitely on the defensive.

The old switcheroo: Patroclus steps in

The Greeks continue to lose, and Achilles's best friend Patroclus pities his fellow Greeks. He suggests a plan that will help the Greeks without requiring Achilles to give in and fight: Patroclus will put on Achilles's armor and show himself to the Trojans. Because Achilles has a bit of a reputation, the Trojans will panic, and the Greeks will beat them back. That's the plan, anyway.

But Patroclus gets too excited and actually enters the fighting. He has a great day, killing Trojans by the dozens, including Sarpedon, a son of Zeus. But finally, he faces the Trojan leader Hector. They throw spears at each other. The god Apollo interferes at this point, whacking Patroclus on the back and knocking his armor off. A young Trojan stabs him, and Hector finishes him off with his spear. Patroclus dies, and Hector strips the armor off his body.

Now it's personal: Achilles returns to battle

When Achilles finds out that Patroclus has been slain in battle, he loses his mind. All he can think of is revenge and killing Hector. He has Patroclus's body brought back to his tent and makes plans to kill every Trojan he can. But Patroclus had been wearing Achilles's armor, and now Hector has it. Achilles explains his problem to his mother, the goddess Thetis. She arranges for the god Hephaestus to make new armor for her son, including the fantastic (and famous) Shield of Achilles.

In the early parts of the *Iliad,* Achilles is generally a nice guy. Even the Trojans admit it. But now with Patroclus dead, Achilles stops being a nice guy. In this sense, the *Iliad* is a tragedy — Achilles clings to his sense of honor but loses his good character. When he comes back into the fighting, he kills everyone in sight. At one point, he meets a Trojan boy he'd already captured and ransomed back once. The boy pleads for his life, but Achilles laughs in his face and kills him. He even attacks the river Scamander (the actual water of the river, which fights back) and nearly wins! Finally, he comes face to face with Hector.

Hector, who's a picture of courage and good sense up until this point, turns and runs. Achilles chases him all the way around the city until finally Hector stops and fights. It's no contest, especially because the gods are all on Achilles's side. He kills Hector and drags the dead body around Patroclus' tomb behind his chariot — 33 times!

The end of the *Iliad* — not the end of the war

With Hector dead and his corpse dishonored, Achilles starts to calm down and return to being a nice guy. He holds athletic contests for the Greeks in honor of Patroclus and hands out prizes very, very fairly. Even old Nestor, who can't compete with the younger guys, gets a kind of Lifetime Achievement Award for being old and wise. Finally, the old king Priam, Hector's father, comes to Achilles's tent to ask for the body of his son. Achilles and Priam weep together — Priam for his son and his city, and Achilles for his own father, whom Achilles won't ever see again, and his friend Patroclus — and Achilles gives the body back. The *Iliad* ends with the burning funeral pyre of Hector the Trojan and a funeral banquet.

The End of the Trojan War

Some of the best Trojan War stories aren't in Homer's *Iliad.* The aftermath of Hector's death, the death of Achilles, the conflicts that result, and the tale of the Trojan Horse all come from other sources. A main source is the book *Posthomerica* ("stuff that happens after the *Iliad*") by Quintus of Smyrna.

The Amazons and Africans

After Hector is killed, the Trojans need a new heroic warrior. The first to show up is Penthesilea, Queen of the *Amazons,* a race of warrior women famous for their ferocity, courage, and skill in battle. They arrive at Troy and offer to help Priam. The next day, they launch a counteroffensive against the Greeks. Penthesilea fights one-on-one with Achilles. Achilles wins and kills the Amazon Queen, but he bitterly regrets his victory because Penthesilea was so brave and beautiful.

The Amazons, the nation of warrior women, are the mythological inspiration for characters like Wonder Woman and Queen Maeve in *The Boys*.

Next comes a vast army from Africa and India, led by the hero Memnon, King of Ethiopia. Memnon is the son of the goddess Eos, or Dawn, and the mortal Tithonus. He assembles a multinational force from Africa and India to come to Troy's aid. In the *Odyssey,* Homer says that Memnon is the most beautiful hero to fight in

the Trojan War. In battle, he kills Nestor's son, but when Nestor offers to fight him one-on-one, Memnon refuses because Nestor is so old. Instead, he has one-on-one combat with Achilles and loses. The gods spirit his body back to Ethiopia to his mother. Generations of Greeks and Romans were deeply moved by stories of Dawn's grief for her dead, heroic son.

The death of Achilles

With Hector dead and two relieving armies — Amazons and Ethiopians — defeated, Troy's fate is sealed. The fighting continues. Shortly after the events described in the *Iliad,* Achilles himself is killed when Paris shoots him in the heel with an arrow. This death is ironic because Paris has the reputation of being the wimpiest guy fighting at Troy, and an arrow was considered a cowardly weapon. But that's that for Achilles. His mother's prophecy was right, though: He lived a short but very glorious life.

A famous myth about Achilles talks about how his mother dipped him in the River Styx to make him invulnerable — all except his heel (where she held him). But the *Iliad* and the other epic poems give no indication that Achilles isn't just a very, very skilled warrior as vulnerable as any other mortal. Today, if someone has a single, fatal weakness, we say that is their *Achilles' heel*.

The bow of Philoctetes and the death of Paris

Philoctetes was a warrior who had been with the Greeks as they sailed to Troy. When they stopped on the island of Tenedos, a snake bit Philoctetes on the foot, which began to stink terribly. So crafty Odysseus dumped the poor guy on the island of Lemnos. There Philoctetes stayed, his stinky, sore foot never healing. All he had to eat were birds that he shot with his fabulous bow, which had once belonged to Heracles. (For the story of the half-divine hero Heracles, head to Chapter 6.)

The Greeks at Troy now have another prophecy: They'll never capture Troy unless they have the bow of Philoctetes. So Odysseus and Diomedes have to go back and convince Philoctetes to help them, after they'd ditched him for years on an island. In Sophocles's tragedy the *Philoctetes,* Odysseus and Neoptolemus (Achilles' son) try to trick Philoctetes into coming back to Troy. Their plot doesn't work, but Heracles turns up at the last minute and orders Philoctetes to return to Troy. Back at Troy, he uses his bow to shoot and kill Paris.

The Trojan Horse and the fall of Troy

With Patroclus, Hector, Penthesilea, Memnon, Achilles, Paris, and Ajax all dead, both sides are running out of heroes. It's time to end the war. Odysseus (of course) has the plan that finally wins the Trojan War. During the night, he has the Greeks build a giant, hollow wooden horse. (You can see a recreated version of it in Figure 7-2.) A selected band of soldiers hide inside the horse while the rest of the Greek army get on their ships and sail around behind a nearby island out of sight. They leave the horse in front of the gates of Troy.

FIGURE 7-2: Turkish authorities built a wooden horse for people to take pictures in front of.

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When the Trojans wake up the next morning, the Greek army is gone, but this huge horse is sitting in front of the gate. A Greek "deserter" turns up and tells a story about how the Greeks have received omens telling them to leave Troy alone, and how they've left this big horse as a going-away present before sailing back across the Aegean Sea.

Needless to say, some of the Trojans are skeptical of this story. A man named Laocoön (rhymes with "saw a shoe on") suggests that the horse may in fact be filled with Greek soldiers waiting for the Trojans to bring the horse into the city. The Trojans test this theory by producing Helen and having her call out the names of some of the Greeks, imitating their wives' voices. (Helen has all kinds of magical powers.) Inside the horse, Odysseus has to work really hard to keep his guys quiet.

Someone else throws a spear, which sticks in the side of the horse. Then the goddess Athena, who hates Troy and loves Odysseus, sends a giant snake out of the sea to eat Laocoön and his sons, as shown in Figure 7-3. The Trojans take this event as a sign that Laocoön's skepticism isn't pleasing to the gods. That's true enough, but they then foolishly decide to drag the horse inside the city, go to bed, and worry about it the next day.

FIGURE 7-3: Laocoön and his sons being eaten by snakes.

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After dark, three big things happen in sequence that put the Greeks ahead of the game:

1. The Greek army sails its ships back to the beach and marches to the walls of Troy.
2. Odysseus and his guys come out of the horse and open the city's gates.
3. They burn the whole place down, kill the men, and enslave the women.

The defeat of Troy is ugly. King Priam takes refuge at an altar, which should protect him, but the Greeks kill him. He's decapitated by Neoptolemus (also known as Pyrrhus) as he clings to the altar. The Greeks also throw baby Astyanax, Hector's son, to his death from the city walls. Finally, most of the Greeks (but not the crafty Odysseus!) forget to offer sacrifices to thank the gods for all their help. All this comes back to haunt them.

A Hero Makes His Way Home after the Trojan War: Homer's *Odyssey*

All the Greeks had a hard time getting home from Troy. Menelaus got blown all over the ocean and ended up in Egypt. He had to wrestle with Proteus, a sea god known as the Old Man of the Sea, to find out how to get home to Sparta. Agamemnon wasn't so lucky. He got home right away but was immediately killed by his wife, Clytemnestra. Remember that ten years earlier, Agamemnon sacrificed their daughter Iphigenia on an altar. Clytemnestra hadn't forgotten or forgiven! Chapter 8 has the gory details.

But the most famous homecoming is that of Odysseus, who has his own epic poem, the *Odyssey*. The *Odyssey* is the ultimate adventure story, full of sex, violence, deceit, and monsters. It poses an interesting question, too, of who is more monstrous: the outlandish creatures Odysseus meets on his way home or the human suitors who settle in at his home in Ithaca, waiting to get his wife, Penelope. It may also be a poem about the hardships and challenges facing any soldier coming home after a long war.

I'll wait up for you, honey

When Odysseus left for Troy, he left behind his home on the island of Ithaca; his wife, Penelope, and his baby son, Telemachus. When the *Odyssey* opens, the war has been over for ten years, but Odysseus still isn't home.

Penelope is having a hard time. She's a wealthy, beautiful woman, 40 years old or so — a very desirable catch. But is she available? Lots of men from Ithaca and neighboring islands assume she is; Odysseus has to be dead by now. All these guys come to Ithaca and camp out in Odysseus's house. They're the suitors, definitely the bad guys of the *Odyssey*.

Penelope keeps promising to pick a suitor to marry but never does. At one point she tells all the hopeful fellows that she's busy weaving a fancy sheet that'll be used as a shroud when Odysseus's old father, Laertes, finally dies and that she'll choose a new husband when she's done. Every day, Penelope makes a big production of weaving, but every night she undoes her day's work. She manages to keep this charade up for two years before one of her slave girls tells on her and the suitors force her to finish the job.

REMEMBER

Why doesn't Penelope just tell the suitors to get lost? Two reasons:

- Having Penelope under constant pressure to hook up with some new beau adds to the suspense of the poem — Odysseus better hurry if he wants what's his.
- Stringing the suitors along lets Penelope keep some control over her life. If she didn't keep toying with the suitors, they could go to her dad and have *him* arrange a new marriage for her. By leading them on, she can waste more time.

Telemachus at this point is about 20 years old. He watches these suitors eat up all the family's wealth, which is supposed to be his inheritance. But as one young man against 70 suitors, he would have to wait for some seriously capable assistance.

What a long, strange trip it's been!

Odysseus and his men have an exciting trip after they leave Troy. The first thing they do is sail to the land of the Cicones and start a war with them. This adventure doesn't go well, and they barely escape with their lives. (Odysseus makes a lot of stupid mistakes in the early part of his journey, but he learns from them all, and that experience helps him deal with the evil suitors after he gets home.) The lesson of the Cicones: Don't start fighting until you're sure you can win.

From the Cicones, they go to the Land of the Lotus-Eaters. These folks do nothing but eat *lotus*, which is some kind of drug that makes them mellow and lazy. Some of Odysseus's men get stoned on the lotus, and he has to drag them back to the ship.

TECHNICAL STUFF

Some scholars see the men's lotus consumption as the all-too-common reality of combat veterans self-medicating to deal with the emotional trauma of war.

Odysseus meets the Cyclops

Odysseus's encounter with the Cyclops named Polyphemus was his most famous adventure. (*Cyclops* rhymes with "high tops." The plural, *Cyclopes*, rhymes with "High top, please!") Odysseus lands on an island and tells his men he wants to see what kind of men live here. Maybe the inhabitants will give him presents! On the island, they find a giant cave filled with giant stuff, let themselves right in, and wait for the cave's owner to come home. Big surprise: He's a monstrously huge man with a single eye. He brings his sheep into the cave with him and then rolls a huge stone over its entrance — a primitive form of locking the door.

REMEMBER

As we note in Chapter 3, the Cyclops Polyphemus is distinct from the Cyclopes who are the children of Gaia and Uranus.

Then he addresses his uninvited guests: "Who are you, and where are you from? Are you pirates?" (Just about everyone Odysseus meets asks him this question. Evidently being a pirate was just another job, one no one felt the need to hide.) Odysseus tells him that his name is Nobody and suggests that his "host" give him a present, which is what Zeus likes to see when strangers meet.

The Cyclops says that his name is Polyphemus, and he doesn't care one little bit about what Zeus wants. *His* daddy was Poseidon! But, as a nice present for his puny new acquaintance, he promises to eat Odysseus last. Then he grabs two of Odysseus's men, slams them on the ground, and eats them raw. He sleeps all night and eats two more men for breakfast. Then he goes out with his sheep and rolls the stone back over the entrance of the cave, trapping the men inside.

Odysseus makes a plan. He can't just kill Polyphemus because he and his men could never move the stone covering the door. He sharpens a long stick and hardens it in the fire. Polyphemus comes home and eats two more men, but this time Odysseus gives him some wine — lots of wine, enough to put him into a drunken stupor. Then Odysseus and his men stick the spikes into Polyphemus's one eye. The blind Cyclops tries to catch his attackers but can't. He cries out to the other Cyclopes on the island. They ask, "Who is attacking you?" Poor Polyphemus answers, "Nobody!" To which the other Cyclopes say, "Well, we can't help you then. Pray to the gods."

Now Odysseus ties the sheep together in groups of three, side by side. At dawn, the men cling underneath the sheep as they walk out of the cave. Polyphemus feels the sheep's backs to make sure no one is riding them, but he doesn't think to check their bellies, so the men escape. They run to their ship and set sail. As they float away, Odysseus screams a last insult at the Cyclops. Polyphemus, enraged, grabs a huge rock and throws it in the direction of the ship. It churns up huge waves and nearly crushes the boat. Odysseus shouts his name to Polyphemus as they escape for good — a mistake, because it gives Poseidon reason to hate him.

Show me who's boss, baby: Circe and the underworld

After a frustrating time when they almost reach Ithaca, only to be blown far away again, they land on the island of the witch Circe. She turns all Odysseus's men into swine (pigs, that is). The god Hermes shows up and gives Odysseus a special herb that prevents the same thing from happening to him. Hermes also tells him how to get his men back: He has to threaten to stab Circe with his sword unless she frees his guys. Circe seems to like an assertive man — when Odysseus threatens

her, she immediately falls in love with him. He and his men spend a pleasant year living with her in her fancy house.

It's Circe who tells them what they have to do next: Visit the underworld and ask the dead prophet Teiresias (see Chapter 8) how to get home. Dead people like blood, and when Odysseus and company get to the underworld, Odysseus kills a sheep and fills a pool with its blood. All the ghosts come running up to get some, but Odysseus holds them off with his sword until Teiresias shows up. Teiresias drinks the blood and then tells them that Odysseus will certainly get home and that they should avoid doing harm to the Cattle of the Sun, the herd of magical cows belonging to Helios, the Sun God (see Chapter 4), at all costs. Odysseus gets to see many dead heroes but eventually returns to the land of the living, and he and his men set sail again.

Sirens (and not the ones on police cars!)

The island of the Sirens is the next obstacle. The *Sirens* are women who sing beautifully and lure men to their deaths on the rocks surrounding the island. Odysseus blocks his men's ears with wax (the noise-cancelling headphones of the ancient world), but he wants to hear this famous song himself. So he gets the men to tie him to the mast and makes them promise not to untie him no matter what he says. When he hears the singing, he begs and pleads to be released so he can go to the Sirens, but the men can't hear him, so they all get safely away.

Between a Monster on a Rock and a Wet Place

The passage between Scylla and Charybdis is next. (Some people say this route is the Strait of Messina between Sicily and Italy.) Scylla is a six-headed monster; if the boat goes too close to her, she'll snatch up six men and eat them. But Charybdis is a whirlpool; if ship goes close to that, the whole thing will go down. Odysseus chooses Scylla; as they pass, she reaches down and grabs six men, much to everyone's dismay, but the boat gets through safely.

The best beef is on the Island of the Sun

Tired, hungry, and demoralized, the men stop at the Island of the Sun, where Apollo keeps the famous Cattle of the Sun Teiresias had warned them not to harm. (See the earlier section "Show me who's boss, baby: Circe and the underworld.") The men don't care about any warning, though, and they kill and eat the sacred beasts while Odysseus is off by himself. As soon as they leave that island, Apollo destroys the boat; all the men die except Odysseus. He clings to the wreckage and washes up on the island of Calypso, a minor goddess who lives off by herself. He spends several years there as her love slave.

Trapped with Calypso

When the *Odyssey* opens, Odysseus is sitting on a beach of Calpyso's island crying. He's been living with the goddess Calypso for years, a prisoner of love. Athena, his sponsor goddess, decides that enough is enough and asks Zeus for permission to bring her favorite hero home. Zeus agrees, but he notes it won't be easy, because Poseidon is really, really angry with Odysseus for hurting his son the Cyclops (as we describe in the earlier section "Odysseus meets the Cyclops").

But Athena gets the ball rolling. She visits Telemachus and suggests he go on a trip to look for news of his father. Such a quest will do two things:

- Make a man out of him.
- Keep him away from the suitors, who've been plotting to kill him because he's heir to Odysseus's stuff and doesn't want them getting their hands on it.

Then she sends the god Hermes to tell Calypso that she can no longer keep her pet. Calypso isn't happy about that but agrees to help Odysseus build a raft.

Raft-wrecked on Phaeacia Island

Odysseus sails off on his raft toward home. Everything goes well until Poseidon notices him and tries to kill him with a huge storm. It almost works; the storm smashes the raft to bits, but Odysseus manages to swim to shore on an island called Phaeacia.

As he lies naked on the beach, the teenaged daughter of the local king finds him, thinks he's cute, and brings him home with her. This sort of thing happened to Odysseus all the time. In the palace of the king, Odysseus tells the whole story of his travels, from when he left Troy after the Trojan War until he came to the island of Calypso. After hearing this exciting tale, the Phaeacian king gives Odysseus a new boat and a bunch of parting gifts.

Heading home: Heads are going to roll

Odysseus and his Phaeacian crew sail away to Ithaca. He's asleep when they arrive, so the crew puts him and his belongings on the beach and departs without waking him. He wakes up in Ithaca disoriented.

A young man, really Athena in disguise, comes up to him. She tells him he's in Ithaca and explains that his house is full of suitors plaguing his wife and son. She promises to help him root them out, and she and Odysseus concoct a plan.

The old beggar disguise

Odysseus, disguised as a beggar, goes to stay with his old faithful swineherd, and Athena gets Telemachus to come meet him there. Odysseus changes back into himself and introduces himself to his son, who, after all, hasn't seen him for 20 years.

The next day Odysseus, again disguised as a beggar, goes to his house. On his way through town, no one penetrates his disguise. No human, that is; his old, old dog, Argus, sick and abandoned, sees and recognizes his master. Argus has been waiting for 20 years to see Odysseus one last time. When he does, he wags his tail and dies.

Odysseus finds the suitors sitting around, bloated after a big meal. They all make fun of Odysseus in his beggar-disguise. Now Penelope shows up. She doesn't know who the beggar is but wants to talk to him. First she complains to the suitors that they haven't been giving her expensive gifts like they should have, and they jump to shower her with gold and jewelry. Then she summons the beggar to talk to her. Odysseus still doesn't reveal his identity, but he tells her that he's seen her husband alive recently. Penelope weeps to hear that and lets the beggar sleep in the house that night.

The only person in the house who sees through Odysseus's divine disguise is the old housekeeper, Eurycleia, who notices a distinctive scar while washing the beggar's feet. Odysseus urges her to remain quiet, and she does.

The bow of Odysseus: Only real men need apply

The next morning, still unaware that Odysseus is home, Penelope brings down Odysseus's old bow and challenges the suitors: If one of them can string it and shoot an arrow straight through 12 rings in a row, she'll take him as her husband. Telemachus sets up the rings and encourages the suitors to try. They all give it a shot, but no one is strong enough to string the bow.

Now beggar-Odysseus asks for a chance. The suitors complain, but Telemachus insists that he be allowed to try. Quick as a wink, Odysseus strings the bow and sends an arrow straight through all 12 rings. Telemachus and his helpers run to bring in more arrows, and Odysseus shoots all the suitors but two, who beg for mercy. Odysseus spares them because one is a singer-of-tales and one is a herald — Odysseus needed *someone* to tell his story!

The old servants rejoice to have their master back. They run to tell Penelope that her husband is home. Penelope, who's no fool, wants to test this strange man one more time to make sure he's really Odysseus. She tells him, "Great! Let's move our bed to a better spot and hop in it!" Odysseus sees through the trick: "No one

can move that bed because it's built on a tree stump rooted in the ground." That fact, which no one but Penelope and Odysseus knows, convinces Penelope that her husband is home at last.

Trouble still stirs among the relatives of the suitors, but Athena steps in, tells them that their kids had asked for everything they got, and informs Odysseus how to make one last journey to appease Poseidon. With that, the long odyssey is complete.

IN THIS CHAPTER

- Breaking down some basics of Greek drama and dramatists
- Walking straight into fate with Oedipus and the House of Cadmus
- Having family for dinner at the House of Atreus

Chapter 8

Of Chorus They're so Dramatic: Greek Tragedy

One of the best ways to find out about Greek myths is to look at Greek tragedy. These are plays written in the fifth century BCE that were performed at public expense in the city of Athens. Most Greek tragedies deal with mythological subjects, especially a couple of really dysfunctional legendary families and the events and characters of the Trojan War (which we discuss in Chapter 7). These plays were filled with drama and heartache, which may make them seem like telenovelas.

TECHNICAL STUFF

The ancient Greeks loved plays. The word "drama" comes from the Greek, and "Greek drama" is a famous genre of literature. Greek drama includes both comedy and tragedy.

Only a handful of these plays actually survive today, a tiny fraction of the Greek tragedies that were performed in the fifth century. But even though the surviving sample is so small, these tragedies tell you a lot about Greek myths, especially how different versions of a single myth could exist side by side.

In this chapter, we showcase the surviving blockbusters of ancient Greece, including stories about the famously tragic families of Atreus, Cadmus, and Theseus. We also explain a bit about the main writers of the day — the guys who collected myth and used old stories to write new scripts (well, new to Greece in the 400s BCE). Those ancient celebrities are Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides.

Intro to Greek Drama

Greek drama involved three actors and a *chorus,* a group that generally represented the "normal folks" and spent the play observing the main characters and commenting on their behavior. All actors and chorus members were men, even when the play had female roles. These performers all wore costumes and masks. Plays were accompanied by music — probably a flute player and a drummer at least — but today no one knows what that music may have sounded like. Plays were written and performed in sets of three — a *tragic trilogy.*

In this section, we give you the gist of this ancient art form, like its connection to mythology and how they did it in Athens. We also clue you in on the main writers of the time and a key component of Greek drama: the tragic flaw.

Athenian theater: Honoring the artsy party god

In Athens, tragedies and comedies were performed in the Theater of Dionysus. It was a typical Greek theater with a semicircular stage at the bottom and level upon level of seats fanning up from the stage. This theater was more than just a theater. It was a temple to the god Dionysus. All Athenians (excluding slaves, who weren't considered citizens), resident aliens, and foreign visitors were welcome to watch the plays for the price of a ticket. Eventually, Athens implemented a welfare program to buy theater tickets for the poor.

REMEMBER

Dionysus was the god of wine, of occasionally getting rowdy, and sometimes actually going insane, and of theater. These three go together, actually, because each has to do with setting aside normal reality, if only for a little while.

Twice a year, the city of Athens honored Dionysus (and had a good time in the process) by celebrating *dramatic festivals,* big citywide parties centered on the performance of plays. The two big ones in Athens were the City Dionysia, a huge springtime extravaganza in honor of Dionysus, and the cozier midwinter Lenaea, a smaller affair in honor of Demeter.

TECHNICAL STUFF

At both the Dionysia and the Lenaea, plays appeared in the context of a competition. After all the tragedies had been performed, a panel of judges awarded prizes — for best trilogy, best costumes, best actors — very much like the Academy Awards. Winning the "best trilogy" award could do great things for a playwright's career.

Mythical recycling: Connecting Greek drama

What all tragedies have in common that makes them tragedies is almost impossible to say. Most, but by no means all, tragedies are serious and involve someone dying, or at least suffering. The philosopher Aristotle says that the best tragedies (in his opinion) have certain things in common, but he doesn't say that every tragedy had to have certain things in common.

Mythology may be one answer to the "what makes a tragedy a tragedy" question. Of the surviving tragedies, most have plots based on mythology. This trait distinguishes them from comedy, which invariably dealt with the day-to-day world of Athens.

The Trojan War provided plenty of plots for the tragedians to work with, of course, but so did other myths. Playwrights also mined the two mythological royal families, the House of Cadmus from Thebes and the House of Atreus from Mycenae. In many tragedies, one character or another makes the observation "After a family is cursed, it will be miserable forever." The stories of these two extended families certainly provide evidence to support that assertion.

This pool of myths provided plenty of material, but not so much that tragedians didn't repeat stories. After all, they had to come up with 20 or so plays every year, and they kept that pace for almost a century! A few stories come down to the present day in versions from more than one tragedian. The story of Electra, for example, exists in plays by Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides. All three poets started with the same myth, but each presented a slightly different version of it. Evidently, the Athenian people didn't mind.

Tragedy and comedy were a particular invention of the city of Athens. Eventually, these plays were performed all over, but they all came from the democratic city of Athens.

A translation error: Creating tragic flaws

Many people think that the point of Greek tragedies, such as *Oedipus Tyrannos* ("Oedipus the Tyrant"), is that the hero has this *tragic flaw,* which is *hubris,* a Greek word meaning pride, and because of his pride he suffers a terrible disaster. This idea is a common misconception.

This notion of tragic flaw comes from a mistake people made when reading the philosopher Aristotle in the original Greek. Aristotle says in *Poetics* that in the best plays, the tragedy arises from a *hamartia.* To Aristotle, this Greek word meant a "mistake made in ignorance as opposed to something intentional." If you were

fixing your roof and accidentally dropped a plank that then killed someone, that would be a *hamartia.* Someone died, but it wasn't a crime because you didn't mean to do it.

What happened, however, was that people in the 19th century read Aristotle in Greek after having read the New Testament in Greek. In the New Testament (written 500 years after Aristotle), *hamartia* means "sin." So they thought Aristotle was saying that the best tragedies depend on some sin or, as they came to call it, *tragic flaw.* Adding to the confusion, this way of thinking — the New Testament way, that is — about tragedy seemed to many readers to apply to Shakespeare's tragedies: Hamlet gets into trouble because he's indecisive, King Lear is vain, Macbeth is ambitious, and so on.

But that isn't the way Greek tragedy works. And anyway, "Criminal gets what he deserves" isn't very tragic . . . we are delighted when that happens! "Guy who does his best but suffers for it" is pretty tragic!

The big three: Meeting the artists

Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides were the Big Three tragedians. They lived and wrote in the fifth century BCE (that is, the 400s BCE): Aeschylus first, Sophocles second (overlapping a bit with both others), and Euripides third. Many, many others wrote tragedies, of course, but no complete play by any other tragic Greek playwright survives today. After the end of the fifth century, no more great tragedians came along, and the Athenians increasingly contented themselves with restaging the old classics.

Aeschylus

Aeschylus's career began around 499 BCE and lasted until his death in 456 BCE. Before Aeschylus, Greek drama featured only two actors, which kind of limited the excitement. Aeschylus had the idea to add a second actor, in addition to one actor and a chorus. Aeschylus's plays won first prize at least 13 times. Aeschylus's most famous plays are *Agamemnon, Seven Against Thebes,* and *Prometheus Bound*.

Sophocles

Sophocles's career overlapped that of Aeschylus and (later) that of the younger Euripides. He added a third actor to the genre. With three characters onstage, they could have very rich tragedy because the third person could act as a foil to the other two and the chorus. (A *foil* is a character who is presented as a contrast to a second character.) For instance, a killer, a judge, and a witness, or an imposter, a

non-imposter, and the guy who has to tell them apart. His first plays competed against Aeschylus in 468 BCE, and his last plays appeared in 406 BCE; that's a career of 62 years! He wrote more than 120 plays — making him the most prolific tragedian — and won first prize at 20 festivals. His most famous plays are *Oedipus Tyrannus* (often called *Oedipus Rex* or *Oedipus the King*) and *Antigone.* Sophocles's plays are powerful, partly because he wrote in very straightforward language, unlike the more highfalutin diction of Aeschylus.

Euripides

The third biggie was Euripides. His first public performance was in 455 BCE, the year after Aeschylus died. Euripides died in 407 or 406 BCE, just before Sophocles did. Euripides wrote 90 plays, as far as anyone knows, but didn't win nearly as often as Aeschylus or Sophocles did. Euripides was certainly the most innovative of the three. He liked to take well-known plots and give them a twist; in his *Electra,* the heroine, Agamemnon's daughter Electra, comes across as a snotty, spoiled brat throughout the play. He liked to make jokes and include witty, subtle references to other plays in his works.

Meet the Parents: The House of Cadmus

The First Family of Greek Tragedy was the House of Cadmus, the royal family of Thebes. Thebes was a real city in central Greece with a real history just like any city, but it also had a mythological history that was much, much more bizarre and disturbing than most.

Two famous cities were named Thebes in the ancient world. One was in central Greece, and one was in Egypt. The Greek Thebes was "Seven-Gated Thebes." The Egyptian city was "Thebes of the Hundred Gates." Egypt was the Texas of the ancient world; everything there was bigger.

The story of House of Cadmus begins with Cadmus's quest to find one cow and then another. The adventures and bloodlines that follow are the seeds for some of the most well-known dramas of ancient Greece: *Oedipus Tyrannus, Oedipus at Colonus, Seven Against Thebes,* and *Antigone.*

Weird beginnings: Cadmus and the cows

Lust and a cow started it all. Agenor, son of the god Poseidon and the goddess Lybia, was a king of Phoenicia (which is now modern Lebanon). He had a beautiful

daughter named Europa. Zeus fell in love with this girl (see Chapter 4 for more details), and when Zeus's wife, Hera, found out, she turned the girl into a cow and sent stinging horseflies to drive the girl crazy and cause her to run off. Agenor sent his son Cadmus to look for his missing daughter. Cadmus made his way from Asia to the continent to the west (which came to be called Europe after his wandering, mooing sister).

Cadmus never found Europa. After a while, he went to the oracle at Delphi to ask the god Apollo what to do. (An *oracle* was a sacred place people could go to ask questions of a god.) Apollo's priestess told him to forget about his sister but to follow *another* cow and start a city wherever it settled down to rest.

Finding a good spot for the city of Thebes

Cadmus left Delphi and came to Boeotia (an area in central Greece). There he met a guy named Pelagon, who had a big herd of cows. One of them wandered off, and Cadmus followed it. When the cow stopped to rest, Cadmus had the spot for his new city!

Conveniently enough, a spring was nearby. Inconveniently, that spring was sacred to the god Ares, who had put a dragon there to guard it. Cadmus killed the dragon and then sacrificed his cow to the goddess Athena.

Sowing teeth and reaping the benefits

Athena suggested that Cadmus plant the dragon's teeth to see what would happen. When he did so, the teeth immediately sprouted and grew into armed men called *Spartoi* or "sown men" (after the fact that he'd sown the seeds).

Cadmus started throwing rocks into the middle of the group. Each Spartos assumed that another Spartos was throwing rocks at him, and they all started fighting each other. When the dust settled, all but five of them were dead, and they were too tired to cause anyone any trouble. And Cadmus now had a population for his new city (small, but you have to start somewhere).

Setting up a cast of characters

Cadmus was forced to serve Ares for eight years (a period called an *eternal year* in Greek myth) to make up for killing his dragon. But afterward, Athena arranged for him to be king of the new city of Thebes. Zeus even found him a wife: the daughter of Ares and Aphrodite, a goddess named Harmonia. (Get it? "War" and "Love" had a kid named "Harmony.")

Cadmus and Harmonia had a bunch of kids: Semele, Agave, Polydorus, Ino, and Illyrius. You can see this genealogy in Figure 8-1. Cadmus's daughter Agave

married Echion, and they had a child, Pentheus. When Cadmus left Thebes, either his son, Polydorus, or his grandson, Pentheus, succeeded him as king. This part of the myth is confused. Illyrius was born last, after Cadmus and Harmonia had moved to Illyria (to the north of Greece), where Zeus eventually turned them into serpents in their old age.

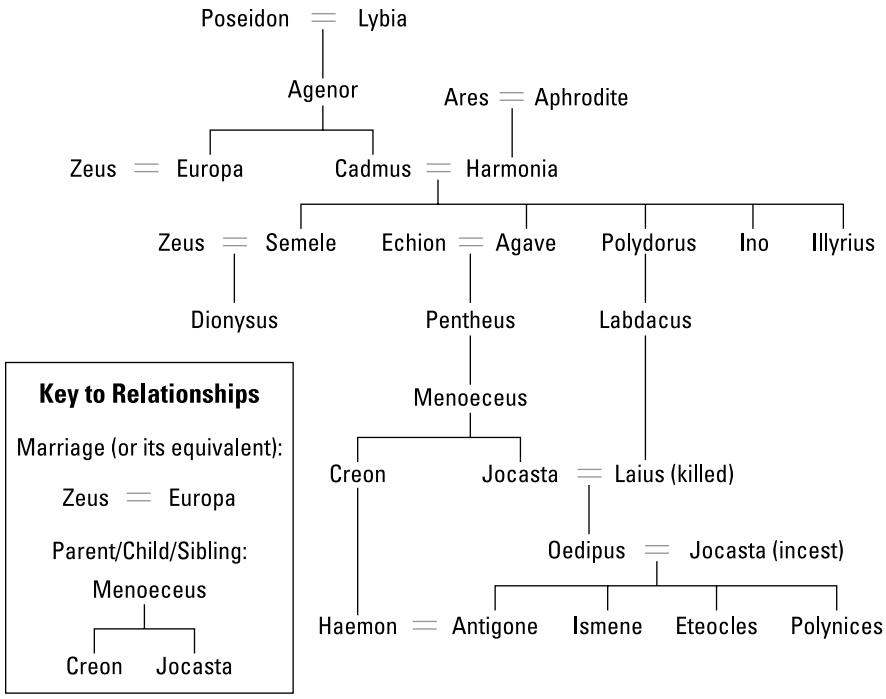

FIGURE 8-1: The Family tree of the House of Cadmus.

The Oedipus saga

Polydorus's son Labdacus became king of Thebes, and after him his son Laius. Laius finally settled down and married Jocasta, who was the daughter of Pentheus's son Menoeceus. (See the family tree in Figure 8-1 for more on who's who.) So Laius and Jocasta were third cousins, but in light of what happened later, a marriage between cousins is no big deal! Jocasta also had a brother, Creon.

Receiving an oracle and an attempting to change fate

After Laius married his cousin Jocasta, he received an oracle from Apollo that went something like this: "Apollo regrets to inform you that you will have a son who will kill you." Now, the Number One rule with oracles from Apollo is *they always come true, no matter what!*

Even so, when these two had a baby boy, they hobbled him by piercing his heels and tying his feet together and then placed him on a mountainside so the wild animals could eat him. No such luck (of course). A shepherd found the baby, picked him up, and passed him along to another shepherd; that guy dropped him off with the king and queen of Corinth, who were looking to adopt a son. They named him Oedipus because of his swollen feet. They also neglected to tell him that he was adopted, which turned out to be a mistake.

When Oedipus was a young man, he learned from an oracle that he was fated to kill his own father and marry his mother. To avoid this fate, Oedipus decided to leave his adoptive parents, the king and queen of Corinth, and hit the road. As he walked, he came across a wagon with some obviously important person, and the attendants hit Oedipus with a club to get him out of their way. In a rage, Oedipus attacked the traveling party and killed everyone, including the old guy in the wagon. No big deal, he thought; happens all the time. (Travel was rough back then.)

Solving the sphinx's riddle and winning a city

Walking along, Oedipus came to the outskirts of the city of Thebes. There he discovered that a monster had moved into the neighborhood. The monster was a *sphinx,* a creature with a woman's head, a lion's body, a snake for a tail, and wings as shown in Figure 8-2. This particular sphinx was asking everyone a riddle and killing anyone who failed to answer it. In fact, the king had recently left to ask Apollo's oracle at Delphi what the answer was, but he'd been murdered somewhere on the road, leaving Thebes with no ruler.

FIGURE 8-2: Oedipus and the sphinx.

Oedipus decided to have a shot at the riddle, which was this: What creature walks on four legs in the morning, two at midday, and three legs in the evening? Oedipus

knew that the answer wasn't a magical monster but a human being, because humans crawl as infants, walk upright as adults, and use a cane in old age.

The sphinx, foiled, killed herself, and the people of Thebes chose Oedipus to be their *tyrannos.* This term comes into English as "tyrant," but for the Greeks it simply meant a sole ruler chosen by the people, as opposed to a king, who got to rule by right of birth.

The new ruler was expected to marry the widow of the former king. This was Jocasta, Oedipus's mother.

TIP

Confused? Here's what happened: The man Oedipus killed on the road (see the preceding section) was the city's king, Laius. Laius's wife is Jocasta, so Oedipus killed his father and married his mother, but none of them knew it. Yet.

Oedipus and Jocasta had four children:

- Eteocles
- Polynices
- Antigone
- Ismene

Watching it all unfold: The blockbuster Oedipus Tyrannos

Oedipus ruled Thebes for many years. But soon, the people began to suffer from a plague. So Oedipus sent the queen's brother, Creon, to Delphi to ask Apollo what should be done.

This point in the story is where the most famous Greek tragedy of all time begins: Sophocles's *Oedipus Tyrannus* (often published in English as *Oedipus Rex*). The actual events of the play are easy to summarize. Creon reports to Oedipus that, according to Apollo, the plague won't go away until the people of Thebes find the murderer of their old king, Laius, and bring him to justice. Oedipus promises to do just that and begins an investigation. One disturbing fact after another comes to light. Everyone tells Oedipus to back off and stop asking questions, but he has promised to save the city. Eventually the whole story comes out: Oedipus is the one who killed the previous king, who was, in fact, his father. So he caused the plague and had children with his mother.

REMEMBER

Things were different in ancient Greece, but not *that* different. Marrying your mother was considered a bad, bad thing.

Jocasta hangs herself in shame, and Oedipus blinds himself, his reasoning being that when he finally dies he wouldn't have to look eye-to-eye with his father and mother/wife in the underworld, which would be awkward to say the least. His daughters, Antigone and Ismene, lead him out of the city. In one of Sophocles' last plays, *Oedipus at Colonus*, an old, blind Oedipus wanders across the border of Athens, where king Theseus (see Chapter 6) invites him to stay. But Oedipus walks into a grove of trees; there is a flash of light; and he is never seen again.

REMEMBER

As we note earlier in the chapter, many people today think that the point of *Oedipus Tyrranus* is that Oedipus has a tragic flaw — hubris, or excessive pride — and that because of his flaw, he suffers a disaster. Not so. The point of this play is that *Oedipus does everything right!* Apollo tells him to find the murderer, and he does. In fact, Oedipus is the only person in the play, including the prophet Tiresias, who seems to take the gods seriously. He has to save the city, and he does.

As an old man, Sophocles wrote one more play about Oedipus, *Oedipus at Colonus,* in which an old, blind Oedipus wanders into Athens, where the mythical king Theseus honors him for his suffering. Satisfied, Oedipus walks into a grove of trees, a flash occurs, and he's never seen again.

TECHNICAL STUFF

Everyone attending a performance of *Oedipus Tyrannus* knew the story of Oedipus. What Sophocles did was make the story — essentially a police procedural with a twist — exciting.

Creon becomes temporary ruler of Thebes until the sons of Oedipus and Jocasta can figure out which one will rule the city. The two young men, Eteocles and Polynices, first agree to share power. Big surprise: This agreement falls apart.

Seeing the cast again: Aeschylus's version

According to the myths about the House of Cadmus, Eteocles and Polynices fought for power of Thebes. Polynices collected an army featuring six other champions (making, with him, seven heroes, one for each gate of Thebes). They attacked the city. These events are the subject of Aeschylus's play *Seven Against Thebes.* The war ended with seven instances of one-on-one combat, one in each gate. The two brothers, Eteocles and Polynices, faced each other and managed to kill each other simultaneously. So that power struggle was over, and Creon was once again temporary ruler of Thebes.

Leaving a bitter legacy: Antigone

Picking up where Aeschylus's *Seven Against Thebes* leaves off (see the preceding section), Sophocles gets back into the action with his play *Antigone.* Antigone, Oedipus's daughter, is engaged to be married to Creon's son, Haemon (her cousin). After the war between her two brothers, Creon has passed a law commanding that all the soldiers who died protecting Thebes will have proper burials, but all those who died attacking it will be left to rot. (Burial was really important because the soul of an unburied corpse couldn't go down to the underworld.) Antigone finds this intolerable — why should she honor one brother but dishonor another? Isn't family more important than politics, even if one's family has had its share of problems?

So Antigone sneaks out of the city and buries Polynices. Creon finds out and orders that Antigone be "killed." Actually, killing his blood relative would be a big no-no, so he orders that she be locked in a cave with one day's supply of food, using the old "She was fine when I left her" trick. Creon changes his mind, but too late. Antigone (and Creon's son, Haemon) kill themselves.

Guess Who's Coming to Dinner: The House of Atreus

Besides Cadmus and his line (flip to the earlier section "Meet the Parents: The House of Cadmus"), the other big, extended, screwed-up mythological family that provided lots of fodder for tragedians was the House of Atreus. Although the House of Cadmus is mostly unlucky, the House of Atreus is filled with despicable, violent characters who inspired the events of several dramas, including *Choephoroi, Agamemnon, Eumenides, Orestes,* and two plays titled *Electra.* All of these plays tie into the *Iliad* by focusing on the immediate family of Agamemnon, who led the Greeks to Troy. They have a complicated back-story.

The bad dads who like to cook

The initial patriarch of the House of Atreus was Tantalus, Atreus' grandfather. He kicks off generations of bad blood by committing a terrible crime. The ancient Greeks believed that certain crimes — killing a relative or guest, cannibalism, vandalizing a temple — cause the criminal to be "polluted" with what they called *miasma*, a kind of stinky, spiritual slime that made the criminal an outcast unless someone could purify them with religious rituals.

In this section, we lay out the unforgivable crimes committed by this family's critical culprits: Tantalus, Pelops, Atreus, and Thyestes.

The sins (and meals) of the father

Tantalus was king of Sipylus in Asia Minor. He was so wealthy he could invite the gods for dinner, but then he served them his own son, Pelops, for dinner. This menu was evidently his ill-advised experiment to see whether the gods *really* were omniscient; turns out they were. They weren't fooled, and they arranged for Tantalus to have a particularly nasty punishment in the underworld (check out Chapter 11 for the rest of that story).

Afterward, they reconstituted poor Pelops. Or, actually, they mostly reconstituted him. The goddess Demeter, who was distracted with worry for her daughter Persephone (see Chapter 5), had accidentally eaten Pelops's shoulder. But the gods made him a new one out of ivory.

The charioteer's bitter curse

Pelops got over being made into stew and moved to Greece. He decided to marry Hippodameia, daughter of Oenomaus, King of Pisa (an area in southern Greece, not the one in Italy). Oenomaus had declared that anyone who wanted to marry Hippodameia had to carry her off in a chariot, getting away with her while he pursued. Losers would be killed. Pelops succeeded by bribing Myrtilus, Oenomaus's charioteer, to loosen the lynchpin on Oenomaus's chariot. (The *lynchpin* held the horses to the chariot.) Dad went crashing to the ground, and Pelops got away with the girl.

Pelops then threw Myrtilus into the sea either to hide the shameful way he'd won the contest or because Myrtilus had the hots for Hippodameia himself. Just before he disappeared beneath the waves, Myrtilus cursed Pelops and his whole family. This murder polluted Pelops, but the god Hephaestus cleansed him. He also gave Pelops a scepter, symbolic of power throughout southern Greece — hence the name for the southern peninsula of Greece, the Peloponnese.

The fight for the throne and a brother's wife

Pelops and Hippodameia had many sons, who grew up, went their separate ways, and set up their own kingdoms in different parts of the Peloponnese. But who would be top dog when Pelops died?

Pelops had an illegitimate son, Chrysippus, born before he knew Hippodameia. Pelops's legitimate sons Atreus and Thyestes killed Chrysippus by throwing him down a well to protect their claims to the throne and to please their mother (who

was understandably resentful of her hubby's bastard son). Pelops found out and cursed those two — the family was now doubly cursed! Figure 8-3 illustrates this lineage.

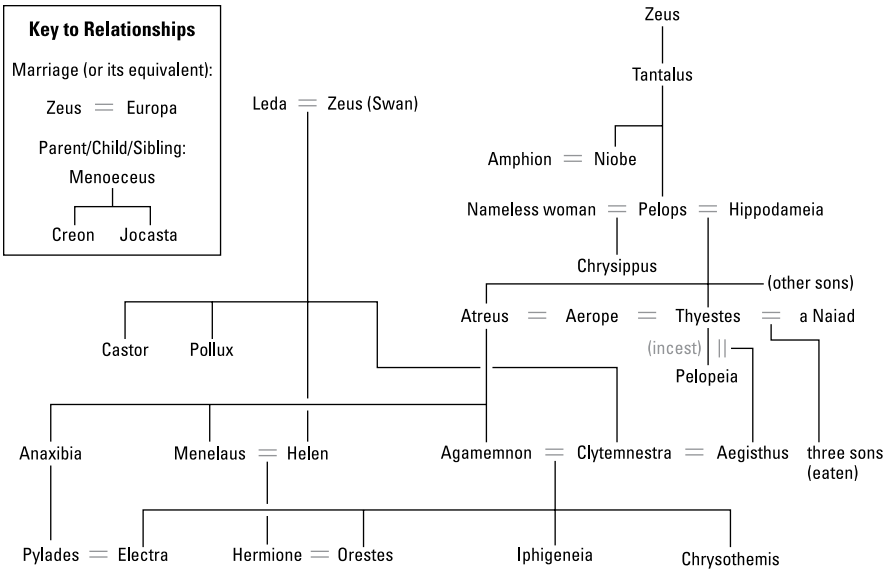

FIGURE 8-3: The House of Atreus family tree.

Atreus was married to Aerope, but she was in love with Thyestes. One day, when Atreus was getting ready to make a sacrifice to Artemis, a beautiful golden lamb wandered by. Atreus grabbed the lamb and stuck it in a box but forgot to complete his sacrifice to Artemis. (The gods and goddesses are greedy and jealous, so omitting a promised sacrifice is a big mistake!) Aerope stole the lamb and gave it to Thyestes.

Shortly thereafter, the people of Mycenae got an oracle telling them to arrange for one of Pelops's sons to be their king. Atreus and Thyestes showed up to try to nab this prized position. Atreus (who didn't realize that his wife had stolen his lamb) suggested that whoever owned a beautiful golden lamb should be king of Mycenae. Thyestes, of course, immediately agreed. This ready agreement surely surprised Atreus, but probably not as much as Thyestes's producing a box, opening it, and showing off the Golden Fleece (not the same Golden Fleece that Jason went after in Chapter 6).

Zeus, however, didn't like Thyestes's trick, so he gave Atreus some advice: Pretend to be happy with things but ask Thyestes to agree to hand over the throne of Mycenae on the day the sun goes backward. Thyestes (who should've known better) agreed; the sun promptly went backward in the sky, and Atreus was king of Mycenae after all.

The family recipe

Atreus was bitter because his wife Aerope had an affair with Thyestes, and he wanted payback. He pretended to want to let bygones be bygones and invited Thyestes over for dinner. For a main course, Atreus killed Thyestes's three sons, cut off their hands and feet, and made them into a stew. After Thyestes had eaten heartily, Atreus showed him the head and hands and presumably said, "Ha!" or whatever would be appropriate under those circumstances. Thyestes now realized he'd just eaten his sons for dinner.

Apollo told Thyestes how to get revenge. All he had to do was have sex with his own daughter, Pelopia, and the resulting son would grow up to take care of things. Thyestes committed incest with his daughter, and, sure enough, she had a son, Aegisthus. Pelopia tried to get rid of baby Aegisthus by abandoning him in the wild, but some shepherds found the baby and arranged for a goat to nurse him. That may be the origin of the name Aegisthus, because *aiges* is the term for goats in Greek.

The practice of abandoning unwanted babies to die in the wild, a practice called *exposure*, was a thing in Ancient Greece, although no one agrees on how common or rare it was. It certainly happens a lot in ancient literature (but so do monsters).

Atreus found out about this baby and for some reason raised him as his own. Now Thyestes was king of Mycenae because he had produced the Golden Fleece (and the people of Mycenae were probably having doubts about their decision to invite a son of Pelops to be their king). Sophocles wrote a tragedy called *Thyestes*, but it doesn't survive, which is a shame.

The damned descendants of Atreus

Atreus had two sons, Agamemnon and Menelaus, and there was Aegisthus, their foster-brother. When they grew up, Menelaus became king of Sparta and Agamemnon returned to Mycenae, killed Uncle Thyestes (but not Aegisthus, his son), and became king himself. The two brothers married two sisters: Agamemnon got Clytemnestra, and Menelaus got Helen. This would be a sweet story — two brides for two brothers — but of course it isn't sweet at all.

As we note in Chapter 7, Agamemnon was the leader of the Greek war against Troy, a role that, for complicated reasons, led him to sacrifice his own daughter, Iphigenia.

While Agamemnon was fighting for a decade at Troy, Clytemnestra's resentment over her dead daughter festered. Aegisthus — who, as Thyestes's son, had lots of reasons to hate a son of Atreus, especially one who had killed his dad — egged her on.

The spoils of war: *Agamemnon*

When Agamemnon returned from Troy, victorious, they were waiting for him. Aeschylus's most famous play, *Agamemnon,* tells the story of the king's return. In the play, Agamemnon isn't a sympathetic character — among other things, he shows up with a new girlfriend, Cassandra, a Trojan captive, and the first thing he tells his wife is, "Look after her, would you, honey?"

Cassandra was a Priestess of Apollo in Troy. She once resisted the god's sexual advances, so he cursed her. The curse was this: She would be able to see the future, but when she tried to warn people about bad things that were coming, no one would ever believe her. Today, a "Cassandra" is somewhat like a "Chicken Little," someone prophesying doom (but not being believed).

One of the most memorable scenes in Peter Jackson's film *The Return of the King* is when Gondor calls for help from Rohan by lighting a chain of huge fires from mountaintop to mountaintop. This scene, taken straight from Tolkien's book, is based on the opening of Aeschylus's *Agamemnon* and is how news of the capture of Troy reached Mycenae.

Clytemnestra and Aegisthus kill Agamemnon, but not his son, Orestes, or his remaining daughter, Electra. Orestes eventually comes home and, with the help of his sister, Electra, kills Aegisthus and his mother. This story is the subject of *three* surviving tragedies:

- Aeschylus's *Choephoroi* (or *Libation Bearers*)
- Sophocles's *Electra*
- Euripides's *Electra*

Pursued by the Furies: Orestes

Orestes was in big trouble, because killing one's own mother was deeply taboo. The Furies, ancient female goddesses, existed just to punish people who did stuff like that, and they were on Orestes in a flash. That was a little unfair, because the god Apollo had specifically told Orestes to take his revenge.

Euripides's play *Orestes* tells this story, as does Aeschylus's *Eumenides.* In Aeschylus's play, Orestes eventually makes his way to Athens with the Furies hounding him at every step. There the goddess Athena arranges a trial with Apollo representing the defendant (Orestes), and the Furies acting as the prosecution. The jury of Athenians is deadlocked, so Athena decides for Orestes. Her reasoning? Mothers are less important than fathers, so Orestes was right to kill his mom as

revenge for his dad. Her justification? She herself had a father, but no mother (head to Chapter 5 for more about her bloodlines), so mothers are clearly less important.

Orestes, off the hook, eventually marries Hermione, daughter of Menelaus and Helen, the "face that launched a thousand ships" and the cause of the Trojan War. Hermione was Orestes's first cousin, sure, but if her mother was any indication, she was probably very beautiful. Electra married Pylades, another first cousin. Marriages between first cousins were pretty common in the ancient Greek world, whether or not we think it is a good idea. With this family it was probably just as well that they kept it in the family.

3 The Cultural Spoils of an Empire: Roman Mythology

IN THIS PART . . .

Track the Romans' "borrowed" mythology back to the original peoples: the Greeks and Etruscans, and others.

Consider the variety of foundation myths for Rome.

Get a serving of Greek and Roman myths with Ovid's book *Metamorphoses.*

IN THIS CHAPTER

- Looking at Roman mythology's Italian roots
- Comparing Greek and Roman deities
- Meeting really Roman deities
- Checking out gods Romans incorporated from other cultures
- Encountering the feminine side of Roman religion

Chapter 9

Will the Real Roman Mythology Please Stand Up?

Many mythology nerds often dismiss Roman mythology, claiming that the Romans just borrowed their pantheon from the Greeks and didn't contribute anything original to their body of religion. That's simply not true. Yes, many Roman deities are also Greek ones. But the Romans had not only their own approach to the Greek deities but also a huge body of gods and spirits that were all their own.

In this chapter, we introduce you to the real story of Roman mythology, including its unique practices and deities. Romans were very superstitious and loved rituals. They also weren't jealous of other gods or particular about which gods their neighbors chose to worship. Roman religion was a free-for-all of ritual, private devotion, public observation, festivals, and personal choice. Unoriginal? Hardly.

Home-Grown Gods: Early Italian Religions

At the height of Rome's power, about 1 million people lived in the city of Rome and over 50 million in the empire as a whole. They spoke hundreds of languages and worshipped a vast array of deities. Rome kept them together with a tremendously efficient Latin-speaking central administration but also let the people observe their own customs as much as possible.

In this section, we tell you about the religions practiced in Italy (including Rome) before the Roman Republic and the Roman Empire. We also explain how the religion of Rome (the empire) grew from a hodgepodge of various cultures.

Acknowledging ancient Italians who weren't Roman

Back in the eighth and seventh centuries BCE, Rome was a modest town in Italy — nothing more. Not all Italians were Romans (at least, not at first). Rome didn't come to dominate the whole Italian peninsula for many centuries. Before that happened, and even after it did, the various non-Roman Italians had their own gods and their own myths. Some of these were very similar to the gods and myths of the Romans; others weren't.

REMEMBER

In the earliest times, Romans worshipped gods that were shapeless, closely associated with the earth, and without distinct personalities. Because of the nature of these gods, the early Romans didn't leave statues, temples, or detailed adventure myths behind for later people to find.

All the people of Italy shared a basic set of deities. However, each group had slightly different names for them and slightly different rituals associated with them. But each group had its own special gods, too.

REMEMBER

So in the early days, Roman religion and mythology looked a lot like the religion and mythology of the other people of Italy. And while the Romans may have had earlier myths, which don't survive, we can see that when the Romans started coming into contact with Greeks (who had many settlements in Italy) and some other Italian peoples (especially the Etruscans, whom we discuss in the following section) did Roman gods start to look human and the Romans start to tell myths about them.

Finding spirits at home and in public

The Romans and native Italians hadn't lacked for deities before they imported the Greek pantheon, and they kept worshipping their own spirits even while they built

temples to Jupiter, Ceres, and all the others (see "The Greek-Roman Pantheon" for more on those deities). The people of this region believed that spirits were everywhere, influencing all spheres of existence, from cooking at home to Roman citizenship.

A Roman couldn't turn around without coming face to face with a god. Spirits were everywhere: Lares watched over the home and the crossroads, Di Penates lived in cupboards, and the two-faced god Janus guarded doors and gates. And no Roman could get rid of a nagging father just by having the old man die; ancestors lurked around the house in the form of exquisitely detailed masks called *imagines*.

Original Italian gods: Numena

Modern scholars call the original Italian and Roman gods *numena,* a word that means "divinity." The numena weren't much like the Greek deities. In fact, they were more like spiritual forces; they didn't have personalities, genders, or any other *anthropomorphic* (that is, looking like humans) attributes. Because they didn't have bodies, they couldn't have sex, eat dinner, go visiting, or play games, so the Romans didn't have many stories to tell about them.

But even without good stories, these numena were forces that took care of everything — yes, *everything.* Numena were guards of the crossroads and the boundaries of the city, entities that watched over rain, wind, and households, and forces that created good or bad luck.

Household gods: Lares

The *Lares* (singular *Lar*) were numena who guarded places, groups, activities, or nations. (We cover numena in the preceding section.) They had no form, shape, gender, or number, and the Romans didn't really come up with stories about them the way the Greeks did with their gods and goddesses. A family would have its own private Lar, and the whole nation shared the public Lares of Rome. Some of the more important Lares hung around crossroads, and special clubs held rituals to keep them happy.

Many houses had little shrines to their *Lar Familiaris* (the Lar of the Family). These shrines included little statues or paintings of young men in short tunics carrying a drinking horn and a bowl, or of two young men with a dog. In Roman households, if food fell on the floor during dinner, it was customary to burn it in front of the shrine to the Lar Familiaris.

The Lares may have been ghosts of dead ancestors. One inscription (a bit of writing carved in stone) that survives from ancient Rome records a present given to a Lar Familiaris and refers to the Lar as an ancestor's ghost. At a Roman festival, the

Compitalia, Roman families hung up little puppets representing all the members of the family and all the slaves. The idea was that if the Lar wanted to take someone to the land of the dead, it may get confused and take the puppet instead.

Spirits in the closet: Di Penates

The *Di Penates* (Gods of the Indoors) also were kinds of numena; they were the gods of the storage cupboards within the home. Romans worshipped them at home along with Vesta (whom we cover later) and the Lar Familiaris (see the preceding section). The Roman state had its own Di Penates, who were supposed to help keep the nation financially solvent. Like the Lares, the Di Penates were depicted as young men. Some people think the Di Penates are the same as Castor and Pollux, who were twin sons of Zeus and Leda and thus Helen of Troy's brothers.

The most famous appearance of Lares and Di Penates in mythology is in Virgil's *Aeneid.* The mythological founder of Rome, Aeneas, is a Trojan who survived the Trojan War (see Chapter 7), sailed to Italy, and set up shop there. In Virgil's poem, when Aeneas is fleeing from the burning city of Troy, he manages to carry his old father, his son, and the statues of his Lares and Di Penates but not to keep track of his wife! No doubt where his priorities are.

Makes a better door than a window: The two-faced Janus

Janus is the two-faced god of doors and gates (which look both directions). Because any enterprise has to "go out the door" to get started, Janus is the god of beginnings as well. That's why the first month of the year, January, is named after him.

Back when all Roman armies started out on campaigns by going through the city's gates, the Roman forum had a special one, the gate of Janus Geminius. If Romans were involved in a war anywhere in the world, the gate stood open (to welcome the army back home). Only in times of complete peace was the gate of Janus closed. This scenario happened once in 235 BCE; three times at the end of the first century BCE, when Augustus was emperor; and a few more times under later emperors. But mostly, Janus's gate stood open because the Romans fought perpetually to expand their empire and defend its borders.

Masks of the Ancestors: Imagines

Romans didn't have many original myths about their own gods, but they made up for it with endless discussion of their own ancestors. A Roman commonly knew

what their ancestors had been doing 400 years earlier! They even knew what their ancestors looked like, thanks to *imagines* (the source of the English word *images*).

If a Roman did something noteworthy — earned some military award or got elected to political office — he was entitled to have an *imago* (mask of his face) made. His family would keep it in a special cabinet shaped like a tiny temple. Inside, they'd include a written document that described everything about the ancestor, like how he moved, distinguishing gestures and marks on his body, height and build, and anything else that could help someone imitate him.

The reason for all this detailed description was that when the person died, an actor would wear the mask at his funeral and march in the funeral parade, imitating him so perfectly that observers would swear he was still alive. And that wouldn't be the last time he'd appear in a funeral. After he died and became an official Ancestor, an actor wearing his mask and imitating him would walk in all subsequent family funerals. An old Roman family would have a cabinet full of imagines alongside their cabinet full of Di Penates and their Lar (which we discuss in the preceding sections). A Roman funeral procession must have been quite a spectacle, with all those ancestors marching alongside the newly dead person.

Meeting the Etruscans: It's all tombs and mirrors

Of all the nations that inhabited Italy while Rome was getting its act together, the Etruscans probably had the most highly developed culture and the richest body of myths. The Etruscans were closely related to the Greeks, if their language, their art, and the remains of their buildings and pottery are any indication. Unfortunately, the Etruscans didn't leave a lot of written documents behind, and what they did leave got destroyed when they were conquered by the Romans and became Romans themselves. So scholars don't have much to read and, as a result, don't really know the Etruscan language that well.

What *did* the Etruscans leave behind? Tombs and mirrors, which can tell more than you may expect. Etruscan tombs were little rooms with beautiful paintings on the walls. Inside each tomb was a stone *sarcophagus* (coffin), often with decorations carved on it. The mirrors are bronze hand-mirrors like you may use while brushing your hair. The fronts of these mirrors were smooth and polished, but the backs often had scenes from Etruscan mythology on them. Favorite topics included scenes from the Trojan War and women holding babies.

This baby thing seems to indicate that the Etruscans (at least the women, who probably used the mirrors) were more interested in family life than battle scenes. Even the Trojan War mirrors focus on feminine topics: mothers and babies and a

little illicit sex for spice. Several mirrors show Uni (the Etruscan name for Hera) breastfeeding the full grown Hercle (Heracles). In one picture, Heracles has a full beard, suggesting that it was really high time he be weaned! Another shows Minerva/Athena, Mercury/Hermes, and a bunch of other gods all holding babies. Even myths that are kind of creepy become sweet and sentimental when they show up on Etruscan mirrors. One of them shows Pasiphaë, the queen of Crete, holding the baby Minotaur on her lap. (For more on the Minotaur, see Chapter 6.)

The carvings on sarcophagi weren't as light-hearted. Many of these images seem to draw on myths popular with the Greeks as well, particularly the myths of the House of Atreus and the House of Cadmus. One sarcophagus shows Eteocles and Polynices, the two sons of Oedipus, fighting each other at Thebes. Another shows Pelops killing Oenomaus. (For more on these myths, see Chapter 8.)

Making way for Roman (Empire) religion

Rome was supposedly founded around 776 BCE as a single city ruled by kings. After about 250 years of that, it became a republic ruled by a Senate elected from the aristocracy. As a republic, it grew from being just one city in Italy to controlling all of Italy, Sicily, Sardinia, and Greece. As an official empire, Rome expanded until it covered most of Europe, the Middle East, and North Africa as shown in Figure 9-1.

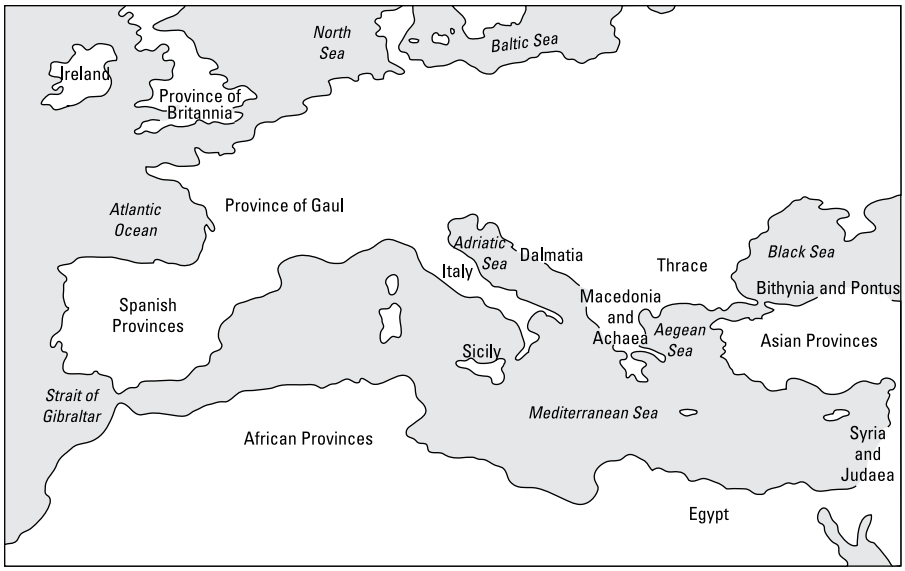

FIGURE 9-1: The Roman Empire at its height.

The result was that Roman religion became a hodgepodge of different customs. The Romans liked Greek mythology — they generally thought the Greeks were the last word in sophistication and culture — so they adopted the Greek gods as their own. But the native Italians who lived on the peninsula before the Romans took over had their own religions, and the Romans went ahead and took them onboard, too. They thought the Egyptian deities were pretty cool, so they incorporated some of the myths of Isis and Osiris. And so on. People who study religion or mythology for a living call this process *syncretism.*

A Roman may have nodded to the images of his Lares and Di Penates (original Roman gods) in the morning, prayed to Isis (an Egyptian goddess) at lunchtime, attended a feast in honor of Heracles (a Greek hero) in the afternoon, had his future told by a *haruspex* (a priest who had learned the Etruscan art of liver-based fortune telling) later in the day, and ended the evening attending a meeting of the cult of Mithras (a Persian deity whose followers met in caves). We cover several of these items throughout this chapter.

REMEMBER

Cult here isn't a bad word! In modern conversation, a *cult* is a fringe, often manipulative and abusive religious group. But when scholars of ancient religion say *cult*, they mean "a particular community of worship" — a group of people who come together at a place and time to worship in a particular way, very much like First Baptist Church or St. James Episcopal Church.

This Roman wasn't betraying his culture by doing all this; he was being a good Roman! After all, what was the point of conquering the world if you didn't have cool new gods and stories to show for it?

The Greek-Roman Pantheon

During the Roman Republican period (531–509 BCE), Greece became the last word in culture and sophistication, and fashionable Romans imported Greek deities and made them their own. A lot of them arrived in a Roman version of the *Odyssey* (see Chapter 7) by Livius Andronicus. Roman names were substituted for Greek names, with the end result being a whole new version of the old familiar Greek immortals.

You can find the Roman deities and their Greek equivalents in Table 9-1. Most of these gods started out as Italian originals but over time became more and more like their Greek counterparts (because the Romans spent more and more time reading Greek literature and associating with Greek people). So by the second century BCE, the Greek and Roman gods came to be very, very similar.

TABLE 9-1 Roman and Greek Deity Equivalents

Roman	Greek	Function
Jupiter (or Jove)	Zeus	King of the gods
Juno	Hera	Goddess of marriage
Neptune	Poseidon	God of the sea
Saturn	Cronos (maybe)	King of the Titans
Gaea	Gaia	Goddess of earth
Venus	Aphrodite	Goddess of love
Pluto (Dis Pater)	Hades	God of the underworld
Vulcan	Hephaestus	God of the forge
Ceres	Demeter	Goddess of the harvest
Apollo	Apollo	God of music
Minerva	Athena	Goddess of wisdom
Diana	Artemis	Goddess of the hunt
Mercury	Hermes	Messenger of the gods
Bacchus	Dionysus	God of wine
Proserpine	Persephone	Queen of the underworld
Cupid	Eros	God of love
Mars	Ares	God of war

After they'd adopted the Greek pantheon, the Romans built temples to the various deities, held festivals for them at appropriate times, and even came up with a certain number of stories about them; see Chapter 11 for some of those.

Roman astronomy

The eight planets and dwarf planet in the solar system take their names from Roman gods: Mercury, Venus, Earth, Mars, Jupiter, Saturn, Uranus, Neptune, and Pluto. (Some astronomers have recently demoted Pluto from a "planet" to a "dwarf planet," a controversial move that the Romans might have had something to say about!) Scientists speculate that another may exist. Because no one can see it but it makes Pluto move in funny ways, they've dubbed this ghostly entity Persephone, after Pluto's mysterious wife.

The moons of planets are often named after the gods' children. Mars had two children, Phobus and Deimus, which are the names of the planet Mars's two small, lumpy moons. Jupiter had a bunch of kids, but he's better known for having a bunch of lovers, so his planet's moons are named for them. Two of the biggest moons of Jupiter are Europa, named for one of the god's girlfriends, and Ganymede, named for one of his boyfriends.

It's all Roman to me

The Roman gods have given their names to a huge number of English words. For example,

- *Cereal* comes from Ceres, goddess of grain crops.
- *Jovial,* meaning "jolly," comes from Jupiter (Jove).
- *Venereal,* having to do with sex, comes from Venus.
- Someone with a *mercurial* temperament has frequently changing moods, after Mercury, who was always coming and going.
- The heavy metal used to make nuclear weapons is called *plutonium* because it comes straight from hell, where Pluto is king.
- A military court is a *court martial,* or a "court of Mars."
- Primavera, the goddess of spring, gives her name to a pasta dish with lots of vegetables.

Many of the months are named for Roman gods as well:

- January was named after Janus, the two-faced god of coming and going.
- February was named after a Latin ceremony for the forgiveness of sins.
- March was named after Mars.
- April may have been named for Aphrodite.
- May was named for Maia, mother of Mercury.
- June took its name from Juno.

The names of the months have remained constant for about 2,000 years, which is a pretty good track record.

Gods of ideals and mysterious gods

Some gods of the Romans embody ideals. Some are really more "ideas" themselves than actual deities. For example, several of the most important spirits personify human qualities such as faith (Fides), honor (Honos), and hope (Spes). The most interesting of the "gods of ideals" is the one who embodies the idea of Roman citizenship: Quirinus. And the origins of some gods are a complete mystery today. Saturn, famous for his fabulous holiday, the Saturnalia, is one.

The Roman citizen: Quirinus

Quirinus is one of the most important original Italian gods. Although no one could say exactly what he was, they knew that he was the embodiment of the Roman citizen. The Romans appointed a special priest in his honor, and they held a festival called the *Quirinalia* every year.

Quirinus originally was either a Latin or a Sabine, the two nationalities that lived near Rome before it became "Roman," and his home was on the Quirinal Hill in Rome. The Quirinal Hill was fused into Romulus's new city (Rome, that is), and Quirinus and Romulus (the mythical founder of Rome) somehow merged into the same entity. According to stories, after Romulus got the city of Rome going and died, he appeared to one of his soldiers in a dream and announced that he was now a god named Quirinus. Because he was supposedly now identical with the mythical founder of Rome, he naturally embodied the idea of the city and citizen. (See Chapter 10 for the story of Romulus and his brother Remus.)

Ho ho ho, Merry . . . Saturnalia?

The merriest festival of the Roman year was the Saturnalia, on the 17th day of December. On this happy day, slaves had dinner with their masters, people lit candles, and everyone exchanged presents. A king of the festival was crowned the *Saturnalicius Princeps,* whose job was to preside over the parties and feasts. The Roman poet Catullus calls this the "happiest day of the year."

No one really knows who this Saturn is in whose honor the Romans permitted themselves be so merry. Some scholars see Saturn as the Roman equivalent to the Greek Cronus, but that Greek god was far from merry. (Although the word *saturnine* means dour or melancholy, so Saturn must have had some reputation for being a serious sourpuss, maybe from Cronos.) Others see him coming from the Etruscan god Satre, about whom nothing is known. Still others see Saturn associated with Satus, some sort of deity having to do with planting and growing grain.

Whatever his origins, Saturn had his own temple in one corner of the Roman forum and a delightful festival December 17. In fact, the festival went on for six or seven days after.

If this holiday sounds a lot like Christmas, that's no accident. Because no ancient Christian knew just when in the year Jesus of Nazareth was born (just as no one knows today), the celebration of his birth came to coincide more or less with the traditional Roman midwinter festival. ("On the seventh day of Saturnalia, my true love gave to me. . . .")

Some Borrowed Gods

The Romans had gods for all tastes and walks of life. Soldiers had their favorite god. Merchants had theirs (who offered an all-you-can-eat buffet). Gardeners liked to put statues of their favorite god in their garden. Many of these gods were borrowed from other cultures. In this section, we introduce you to three borrowed gods.

Mithras, patrolling good and evil

Mithras came to Rome from Persia, where he's known as Mithra. (Flip to Chapter 20 for Persian mythology.) In the dominant religion of Persia, Good and Evil are in a constant battle for control of the world. Mithra is the referee in this battle; he's also the god of legal contracts and of cattle stealing. So he covers a wide range of things, all of which are important.

The cult of Mithras seems to have been brought to Italy by pirates (or "unofficial, vigorous, sea-going entrepreneurs," depending on where you stood on the issue) from Cilicia, which was the province of Rome around the Black Sea. After Mithras got to Rome, he became associated with the Sun God, and members of his cult seem to have regarded him — at least when they were participating in his rituals — as almost the One-and-Only God. His title was *Deus Sol Invictus Mithras*, or "Invincible Sun God Mithras."

Ordinary folks became members of Mithras's cult, especially soldiers and minor government bureaucrats. That suggests the cult was comfy and down-to-earth, but one unfortunate side effect is that those people didn't write many books, so they didn't leave much of a record about what actually went on in this popular cult.

The Cult of Mithras was especially popular among Romans in the second and third centuries CE — at the same time the cult of Jesus of Nazareth was gaining

popularity and evolving into Christianity. And, in fact, many striking similarities exist between Mithraism and early Christianity.

Under the Church of Santa Prisca in Rome, there was an ancient underground shrine to Mithras. Down there is an inscription saying that Mithras "saved us all with the shed blood," which sounds much like the language of Christian rites. In Mithras's case, however, the blood probably wasn't his own but rather the blood of a cow he killed with his bare hands. You can see a representation of this event in Figure 9-2.

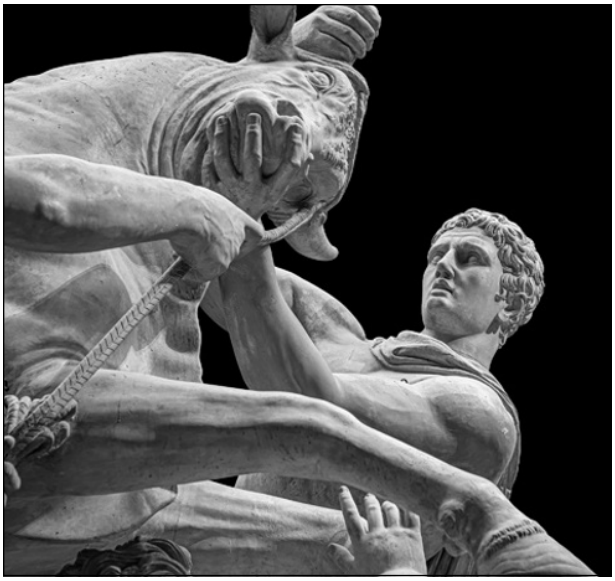

FIGURE 9-2: Mithras killing the bull and saving the world with the bull's blood.

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The all-you-can-eat buffet chef: Hercules

REMEMBER

The Romans knew Heracles, the Greek hero who turned into a Greek god (see Chapter 6), as Hercules. The Romans accepted him as their own and loved him as much as the Greeks did.

He started life as a mortal, worked hard helping folks out, suffered more than his fair share, and died as a result of betrayal but became a god; head to Chapter 6 for the full story. His was an encouraging story, probably because of the happy ending to his biography. The Romans worshipped him as Hercules Invictus ("Unconquered Hercules").

Hercules's cult was popular with Romans from all walks of life but especially among merchants. Like Hercules, merchants worked all the time, and their jobs

forced them to travel. Because members of the cult of Hercules Invictus were supposed to *tithe* — give one tenth of their profits to the god — his cult was very wealthy.

He had a sanctuary in Rome called the *Ara Maxima,* the "Greatest Altar," which was the site of daily sacrifices in his honor (daily because they could afford it). No women or dogs were allowed at his sanctuary, but men were welcome, and they came in droves. One reason, perhaps, for such a good turnout was a particular rule of his cult: All meat from the sacrifices to Hercules had to be eaten the same day. The Ara Maxima must have been like a daily, free, all-you-can-eat steak buffet for cult members. So once again, Hercules the Unconquered helped his fellow man get through the workday!

Ancient dirty jokes: Priapus

Priapus is the god with a sense of humor. What's not to like about the god of fertility, sexual humor, and farming? Nothing, according to the Romans!

Priapus is a very ancient Italian god. A Greek writer in Italy, Xenarchus, wrote a play about Priapus in the fourth century BCE, and he became more and more popular in the third century, spreading all through Italy.

He appears as a male god with enormous genitals, so associating him with both sex and fertility (and with the most important kind of fertility, the fertility of the farm) was natural. Male gods rarely are responsible for things growing out of the earth; that's normally for female divinities like Demeter, Ceres, or the Bona Dea (whom we discuss in the later section "Bona Dea, the Good Goddess"). But Priapus takes on the job with a smile.

Many Romans kept a statue of Priapus in their gardens, and his job was to keep intruders out. He was supposed to accomplish this task by threatening intruders with his huge genitals.

A whole genre of poetry, called *Priapeia,* consists of short, funny poems in which Priapus issues threats to garden intruders, with lots of really nasty humor. Often, much of the humor of these poems is at the expense of the god himself.

Roman Goddesses

Some of Rome's most important deities were female. Vesta, goddess of the hearth, keeps everyone's household functioning; her priestesses, the Vestal Virgins, hold Rome's luck in their bodies. The Magna Mater, or Great Mother, is responsible for

making things grow every spring. Bona Dea, the good goddess, is an extremely ancient Italian deity of fertility and the earth who also oversees the progress of growing things, from plants to unborn babies. Although manly gods like Mithras in the preceding section were popular with particular groups, these goddesses belonged to everyone in Rome.

REMEMBER

Although Roman women were disadvantaged compared to men, as has indeed been the case with women in most of the world for centuries, they still participated in the maintenance of the city to quite a large degree. Many women took an active interest in politics, they were important to keeping the family running, and they could be religious professionals.

Vesta and the virgins

Vesta is goddess of the hearth — that is, the fireplace. Or rather, is the hearth. The hearth was the focus of Roman life . . . literally, since "fireplace" in Latin is *focus*. Vesta's priestesses were the *Vestal Virgins*, girls who were super important in keeping Rome and Roman life going, both spiritually and bureaucratically.

The goddess

Vesta is one of the most ancient of the Roman spirits and is extremely important within the home and the family. She guards the house, the family, their flour and bread, and helps keep domestic order. Each family worshipped Vesta along with its other household gods, the Lares and Di Penates, which we cover earlier in the chapter. She was so beloved that when Christianity was on the rise among Romans, hers was the last pagan cult to die away.

REMEMBER

Vesta also had an extremely important public cult, served by a group of special priestesses and supervised by the *Pontifex Maximus,* the chief priest in Rome. You can read about them in the following section.

The Vestal Virgins

Vesta's priestesses were called the *Vestal Virgins.* There were always six of them, and they had to be virgins — no exceptions, no excuses. You can see one in Figure 9-3.

Rome's luck depended on the Vestal Virgins' remaining chaste, so no funny business for them. If someone accused a Vestal Virgin of breaking her vows, she was tried before a special court. If the court found her guilty, her punishment was ugly: She'd be thrown into a hole in the ground, the hole would be sealed up, and she'd be left to die.

FIGURE 9-3
A Vestal Virgin.

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The Vestal Virgins had many important jobs. They made sure that the perpetual fire on the Public Hearth never went out. They were also in charge of public records. All wills, birth certificates, certificates of citizenship, documents recording the freeing of slaves, and death certificates came to the Temple of Vesta, and the Vestal Virgins collected them, catalogued them, and filed them away for safekeeping and easy retrieval. Any Roman citizen could file a will with them, and many people did. For poor folks, it was one of their few chances to feel important.

The Vestal Virgins were inducted into the priesthood as young girls and stayed there for about 30 years. They were allowed to marry after retirement but usually didn't; it was considered bad luck. Vestal Virgins were by no means sequestered. They could go out in public and have friends and were popular guests at dinner parties — they had kind of a celebrity status in Rome.

Magna Mater: The Big Mama

The Magna Mater, or Great Mother, came to Rome from Anatolia in what is now Turkey. She also goes by the name of Cybele (and in some Persian accounts, Agdistis). She had cults all over the Mediterranean world, and the Romans

welcomed her with open arms. She had a temple of the Palatine Hill in Rome, and all the priests at the temple had to be from the east (so Big Mama would feel at home).

The Magna Mater enjoyed festivals every spring because she's at least partly responsible for making things grow — a job she shares with Ceres and some other female gods. One of her festivals involved cutting down a pine tree and putting it in her temple, which may be the ritual ancestor of the Christmas tree.

Bona Dea, the Good Goddess

The Bona Dea is the Good Goddess. She doesn't have a name — or rather, her name was secret and not supposed to be uttered. Everyone referred to her by her title. She isn't specifically Roman but rather an Italian goddess in charge of the earth and all the good things that come from the earth. She's also the patron goddess of chastity and fertility in women (evidently, chastity and fertility, each in its proper place). Men weren't allowed to enter her temple because she's a goddess just for women.

The priestesses of the Good Goddess sometimes gave her the names Fauna ("Critter"), Maia (just a name), or Ops ("Wealth"). But the priestesses knew that these aren't her real names.

A special annual festival cleverly called the Bona Dea was held in December in her honor. The point of the festival was to put the Good Goddess to sleep for the year. If they didn't do it correctly, she may not sleep well, and all growth would be cursed until the next year.

The festival was held in the house of one of the two Consuls of Rome (the office of Consul was like that of president, but two Consuls ruled at the same time). The Consul himself wasn't present; only women could come. The Consul's wife and the Vestal Virgins (see the earlier section "Vesta and the virgins") presided over the festival.

At the festival, the women of Rome said the secret name of the Good Goddess, and it was very, very bad luck for any man to hear it. All the women drank wine but called it "milk." This act was part of the secret all-woman nature of the festival, because according to Rome's most ancient laws, a husband could legally kill his wife if he caught her drinking wine. (The law was long out of date, but it must still have been fun for the women to drink lots of wine with no men around to disapprove.)

IN THIS CHAPTER

- Creating a city: Romulus and Remus
- Justifying the First Punic War: Naevius's *Punic War*
- Retrofitting a foundation myth: Virgil's *Aeneid*

Chapter 10
Virgil's *Aeneid* and the Founding of Rome

Rome is a city in central Italy. At first it was ruled by kings, and then it became a republic, ruled by an elected senate. The Roman Republic was successful, and grew to take over more and more of Italy, first, and then Greece and parts of North Africa, the Near East, and what is now France and Spain. So, for a couple of centuries, the Roman Republic possessed an "empire." But it's the period after the Republic fell apart and Rome came to be ruled by an actual Emperor that we start calling it the Roman Empire.

The name "Rome" comes from the name of (one of) the city's legendary founders, Romulus. He was one tough customer.

This chapter tells the story of the founding of Rome in two different ways because the Romans had two foundation myths. (A *foundation myth* is a myth that explains the origins of a city, a nation, or a culture.) One of the Roman foundation stories we explore in this chapter is the myth of the twins Romulus and Remus, who were raised by a wolf. Another story is that of Aeneas the Trojan, told in the *Aeneid*, a poem written by the ancient Roman poet Virgil in around 25 BCE. These stories helped the Roman people explain to themselves and everyone else how they came to be in control of the entire Mediterranean.

The Original Foundation Myth: Romulus and Remus

This Roman foundation myth begins in the city of Alba Longa, where a man named Procas was king. Procas had two sons: Numitor and Amulius. The younger son, Amulius, seized the throne for himself and (for good measure) had Numitor's sons killed. Amulius also forced Numitor's daughter, Rhea Silvia, to become a *Vestal Virgin* (a priestess of the goddess Vesta, the goddess of the Hearth) to make sure Numitor's immediate family wouldn't produce any more male heirs. (Chapter 9 has more on the Vestal Virgins.)

Amulius's plan must have seemed rock-solid, but things have a way of happening in mythology. Rhea Silvia was seduced by the god Mars and got pregnant.

When King Amulius noticed she was pregnant, he chained her up. When she gave birth to twin sons, Romulus and Remus, Amulius ordered that they be drowned in the Tiber River. As luck (or fate) would have it, the guys ordered to do this nasty job weren't diligent. Rather than drown the babies, they abandoned Romulus and Remus at the river's edge.

As it happened, they didn't die. The story of their survival and adventures was known to all Romans because it's also the story of the birth of Rome.

The legendary twins

A mother wolf found Romulus and Remus and nursed them herself. Figure 10-1 shows the famous sculpture of Romulus and Remus with the she-wolf. Eventually a shepherd named Faustulus found the babies and adopted them. They grew up and devoted themselves to a life of crime.

On one sheep-stealing expedition, Remus was captured and brought before his uncle, King Amulius. Faustulus decided this moment was a fine time to tell Romulus the story of his birth. Romulus got angry, stormed the castle, murdered his uncle, rescued his brother, and made his grandfather Numitor king of Alba Longa.

Feeling refreshed and inspired after the death of their late uncle, Romulus and Remus thought founding their own city where the wolf had rescued them would be a cool idea. But they couldn't agree on where it should go. Romulus said he had received a sign from the gods and started marking a boundary on the Palatine Hill. He did so by digging a ditch, or *pomerium.* Remus thought the ditch was pitiful and jumped over it to prove his point. Romulus got really mad, killed Remus, and founded the city all by himself. He named it "Rome" after himself.

FIGURE 10-1: Romulus, Remus, and she-wolf.

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Now I need some Romans: The rape of the Sabine women

Alone after killing his brother and marking off his territory (see the preceding section), Romulus had a city . . . that no one lived in. So he made it known that anyone needing refuge — criminals, runaway slaves — could find it in Rome. Soon he had a nice motley collection of thieves, murderers, and other unsavory types.

They were a start, but a population of men couldn't keep a city going for long. They needed some women to make the Roman people self-sustaining. So Romulus sent a message to the people in the surrounding areas, the Sabine tribes, inviting everyone to a big track meet and picnic and telling them to bring along the whole family. The Sabines showed up, but just as the party was getting fun, Romulus gave a signal, and his men grabbed all the Sabine women and ran away with them.

The Sabines were pretty upset about this trick, but they took their sweet time retaliating. After a few months, the Sabine king, Titus Tatius, got his army together and marched on Rome. The Romans started fighting with them, but after a little while the women intervened. A bunch of them had Roman babies and husbands by now, and they didn't see any point in continuing hostilities.

REMEMBER

The Sabines and the Romans made peace, and their two peoples united. Titus Tatius and Romulus ruled together for a short time. After Tatius died, Romulus ruled alone for another 33 years, the first king of Rome.

Why the Romans Needed Another Myth: Down with Carthage!

To understand why Rome had more than one foundation myth, you need to know a little bit about Carthage. Carthage was a city in North Africa, in what's now Tunisia. On a map, Italy and Carthage are directly across the Mediterranean from each other, with only one thing between them: Sicily! People from Carthage were called *Carthaginians.*

In 264 BCE, the Romans went to war with the Carthaginians in Sicily. This conflict was the First Punic War. (*Punic* was the Latin adjective for *Carthaginian;* you can read more about the Carthaginians in Chapter 19.) Rome had to learn to fight at sea and had to build itself a navy.

REMEMBER

What does the First Punic War have to do with mythology? Well, a good foundation myth can help justify this conquest of Sicily and make lasting hatred between Rome and Carthage perfectly sensible.

Gnaeus Naevius was a Roman who actually fought in the First Punic War. While the war was still going on but after he'd retired from military activity, he wrote an epic poem, the *Punic War*. (*Epic poems* were long poems telling of heroic deeds and often passed down orally.) It was the first major piece of Roman literature — as far as anyone can tell — to tell the story of Aeneas.

REMEMBER

Aeneas was a Trojan who escaped from the city of Troy when the Greeks captured it (see Chapter 7). In Naevius's poem, Aeneas sails away from Troy and comes to Carthage, where he falls in love with the queen, Dido. He eventually ditches her to start his own city (later to become a Republic, and then an Empire), which would one day become Rome. Dido kills herself, but not before putting a curse on Aeneas: Forever and forever, the curse goes, there'll be hatred between Aeneas's people and Carthage.

Naevius' storytelling was political:

» Naevius wrote an epic poem, and everyone knew that epic poetry was *important,* and that the stuff in epic poetry was *mythology,* and therefore was *true.*

» Aeneas was Trojan (from Troy), and anyone reading Homer's epic poems can see that the Trojans were really Greeks (even though Troy was in present-day Turkey, across the Mediterranean from the Greek mainland). They spoke Greek, worshipped the Greek gods, and did all the same things the Greeks did.

By claiming that Rome was *really* founded by a Trojan, Naevius was claiming that Romans were actually Greeks, or at least that Romans and Greeks were close cousins. So as Rome was fighting a war for Sicily (which was full of Greeks), Naevius's poem helped make the claim that Rome had more business in Sicily than the Carthaginians did because Romans and Greeks were related. Naevius's poem provided a mythological excuse for Romans to fight Carthaginians.

There! A nice new mythological history, designed to help Romans feel good about this century-long war!

Emperor Augustus and Virgil's PR Machine: The *Aeneid*

When Augustus became *Princeps* (Emperor) of Rome in the first century BCE, ending the period of the Roman Republic and instituting the Imperial period, he thought he could use some more history. So around 30 BCE, he hinted to the poet Virgil that he wouldn't mind too much if someone were to write a long epic poem talking about how he, Augustus, had personally saved Rome from a century of civil war. Virgil got out his *Iliad* and *Odyssey* (see Chapter 7) and read them along with Naevius's *Punic War* (see the preceding section) and came up with the perfect hero: Aeneas. (We explain why Virgil liked him in the following section.)

Virgil started writing his great epic poem, the *Aeneid,* in 29 BCE and kept right on writing until he died on September 20, 19 BCE. He actually asked (in his will) that the poem be burned because a couple of bits didn't perfectly satisfy him. However, Augustus, pictured in Figure 10-2, knew a good thing when he saw it and had the poem published.

The *Aeneid* tells the story of Aeneas but is also loaded with "prophecies" about how Aeneas's job as founder of Rome will eventually be brought to fulfillment with Caesar Augustus. The poem is a big propaganda piece intending to lead its original readers to see Augustus as a savior sent by the gods to fulfill an inevitable history.

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FIGURE 10-2
Augustus had a sculptor make him look like the Greek god Apollo.

REMEMBER

But that doesn't mean that the *Aeneid* is *only* propaganda. Anything worth reading has lots of different meanings that are all "true" at the same time. So the *Aeneid* is propaganda but also mythological history and a fine work of art in its own right.

Duty calls: Aeneas is just the guy

Aeneas was so perfect for Virgil's purposes because he had escaped from the city of Troy when the Greeks captured it — events described in Homer's *Iliad* (see Chapter 7). Other stories about him say that he had sailed to Italy and set up shop there. His mother is the goddess Venus; before he was born, she foresaw that he'd rule over the Trojans and found an everlasting dynasty. He hadn't done anything particularly heinous in the *Iliad*, and best of all — for the Romans — he hadn't died during the war.

Escape from Troy

At the end of the Trojan War, the Greeks destroy the city of Troy and kill all the Trojan men. (They have other plans for the women.) Aeneas manages to escape, carrying his aged father, Anchises, on his back and his son Ascanius in his arms. He also brings along his images of his household gods, the Lares and Di Penates (see Chapter 9).

The reason Anchises is too frail to walk is that he'd long ago spent the night with the goddess Venus. The ancients knew that sex with a goddess would enfeeble a mortal man forever (but was worth it nevertheless). That's how Venus came to be the mother of Aeneas.

Duty calling is a big theme in Virgil's *Aeneid.* This picture of Aeneas, carrying everything but the kitchen sink (or his wife) out of Troy sums up this hero: He is dutiful. Odysseus (known as "Ulysses" to the Romans) is crafty and Achilles is brave (see Chapter 7), but Aeneas does what he is supposed to.

Virgil's *Aeneid* was written between 29 and 19 BCE, but the events in it are supposed to have happened a thousand years earlier. In the poem, various prophets tell Aeneas what "will happen" in the history of his people. Obviously, even though Virgil's characters are prophets, Virgil himself didn't have to be a prophet because the events in the prophecies had already happened. This kind of "prophecy" is the easiest to write: prophecy after the fact!

A Mediterranean cruise

Aeneas and company get into a boat and sail away. He has a lot of adventures on the trip, and in fact the first half of the *Aeneid* has a lot in common with Homer's *Odyssey* (see Chapter 7). Aeneas even sails past the island of the Cyclopes, close enough to see the big critters (but he doesn't stop).

My Carthaginian queen

After a short stop in Epirus, Aeneas and his men sail on. Duty and anger play a big part in what happens next.

As they sail along, Aeneas and his Trojans are tossed by a terrible storm sent by Juno (queen of the Roman gods) to smash them to bits. But her husband, Jupiter (king of the gods), notices what was going on and sets her straight: Killing Aeneas isn't allowed because he's just doing his job, which is to sail around until he founds Rome.

Aeneas's ship washes up on shore in Carthage. There he meets Dido, the Carthaginian queen. Dido is a Phoenician, born in the city of Tyre in modern Lebanon. She fled her homeland after her husband was murdered and settled down at the site of Carthage. She's just completing construction of her new city when Aeneas and his men arrive.

You're cute; let's move in together

Dido welcomes Aeneas and his men and (predictably) falls in love with Aeneas. He returns her affection. One day they go out hunting and get caught in a storm. They hide in a cave and make love as long as the storm rages. From then on, they live together like a married couple, and Aeneas acts as king of Carthage. Dido starts to hope he'll marry her.

But the gods have other plans. Tired of Aeneas's dalliance, they have the god Mercury send him a message reminding him that he's supposed to go to Italy to found a new "Troy." Aeneas, ever dutiful, decides it's time to leave Carthage and continue his journey. He has no plans to take Dido with him, even if she wants to go.

He's a real snake about it, though. He tries to slip away without even letting Dido know he's leaving. This plan doesn't work (she's the queen of the city, after all, and someone's bound to tell her). She confronts him at the harbor.

Dido's curse: Why Carthage and Rome didn't get along

Dido is really, really angry, but Aeneas can only hem and haw and say the gods told him to leave. She builds a giant funeral pyre, claiming it's a magical rite to bring Aeneas back. Then she goes to bed. She tosses and turns all night and rises in the morning to discover that Aeneas and his buddies have already set sail without saying goodbye.

Furious, Dido curses Aeneas and prays for everlasting hostility between Carthage and her faithless lover's descendants, the future Romans. Then she climbs on top of the pyre and stabs herself with Aeneas's sword.

REMEMBER

And as Virgil "predicted," Rome and Carthage never did get along very well. The Romans used the story of Dido's prayer for enmity as justification for going to war against Carthage in the days of Hannibal (218–201 BCE).

Aeneas's adventures in Italy

After deserting Dido (see the preceding section), Aeneas finally lands at Cumae in Italy (which later became a beach resort popular among wealthy Romans). There he encounters a priestess of Apollo called the *sibyl* (see Chapter 4). She takes him on a quick tour of the underworld, where he meets his dad. Aeneas's father tells him he's going to found a great race and shows him the souls of future Romans just waiting to be born.

Aeneas also runs into the ghost of Dido. He tries again to explain himself and make excuses, but she won't listen and goes off to be with the ghost of her Phoenician husband.

The prophecy comes true

Aeneas sails off again and lands in the kingdom of Latium in Italy. He and his men sail up the Tiber River and then pull their ship over to the shore. Exhausted, they decide to have lunch. After they've eaten all their food, they're still so hungry that they eat the pita bread they're using for plates. Ascanius, Aeneas's young son, says, "You guys are eating your tables!"

It matches a prophecy Celaeno, one of the scary *Harpies* (vengeful goddesses), gave them way back when they were in Epirus: that when Aeneas was really tired, he'd find a spot by a river where a huge white pig would be nursing 30 piglets. He could rest there. And he shouldn't worry about eating the tables because Apollo would make everything okay. (Like most prophets, Helenus's prophecies were often difficult to figure out until whatever they foretold had already happened.)

So there they are by a river, eating their tables. But what about that giant white pig with 30 piglets?

REMEMBER

That giant white pig represents the city that Aeneas's people would start. No, it wasn't Rome, but Aeneas's son, Ascanius, did found a place called "Alba Longa" (*alba* is "white" in Latin, hence the color of the pig). Ascanius was the first king of Alba Longa. The 30 piglets were the 30 tribes of Italians who were all "Latins" and who would later join together in the Latin League, which Rome eventually conquered. So Aeneas's city Alba Longa would be "mommy" to all the Latin people.

TIP

If Alba Longa sounds familiar, that may be because it also appears in the Romulus and Remus foundation myth we describe in the earlier section "The Original Foundation Myth: Romulus and Remus."

A bride and a war

To pull off the vision of the preceding section, though, Aeneas has to make some local connections. So he looks up the local king, a man named Latinus. Latinus promises Aeneas can marry his daughter Lavinia. An oracle had said she'd marry a foreign prince, and Aeneas seems to fit the bill.

Unfortunately, Latinus is hedging his bets; he's already promised Lavinia to Turnus, the leader of another Italian tribe called the Rutulians. Turnus is insulted and goes to war against Aeneas and Latinus. The armies fight, and eventually Aeneas comes face to face with Turnus and kills him in one-on-one combat.

Nope, he didn't found Rome

One surprising thing about the *Aeneid* is that Aeneas doesn't actually come to a city called Rome or even start a city called Rome. In fact, because of Dido's curse, Aeneas doesn't get to found any city at all. All he does is get his people to the Tiber River in Italy. Two of his descendants, though, are Romulus and Remus, the founders of Rome.

But Aeneas does get to see the spot where Rome will eventually be. One of his allies in the war against Turnus (see preceding section) is Evander, a Greek guy and king of a city called Pallanteum. Evander shows Aeneas around Pallanteum, which was built on one hill with six other hills nearby.

Those seven hills would one day be the seven hills of Rome: The Palatine Hill (the site of Evander's city of Pallanteum and where Romulus digs his ditch in the earlier section "The legendary twins"), the Capitoline Hill, the Viminal Hill, the Esquiline Hill, the Aventine Hill, Quirinal Hill, and the Caelian Hill.

IN THIS CHAPTER

- Transforming people into other forms and creatures
- Meeting the lovers of Ovid's great work
- Merging love and soul with Cupid and Psyche

Chapter 11

Time to Change Things Up: Ovid's *Metamorphoses*

The Romans were excellent storytellers; they were so good, in fact, that their Roman tales of doomed love, mistaken identity, and magical changes are often more famous than the Greek originals.

The Roman author Ovid (43 BCE–17 CE) had great literary success with his famous work *Metamorphoses*, which told a bunch of tales involving individuals who transformed from one shape into another. Most of his stories are Greek, but they became Roman after Ovid was done with them.

In this chapter, we walk you through Ovid's spin on things like the creation of the world and a great flood. We also give you the scoop on the gods' adventures and love affairs.

Surprising Transformations and Heroic Hunters

Ovid called his book *Metamorphoses* because it told the stories of magical transformations. For example, in the story of Arachne, a young woman gets turned into a spider. In some stories, the transformation is a very insignificant part of the plot;

for example, the tale of the Calydonian boar hunt is about a hunt for a boar (duh!), but Ovid slips in a transformation at the very end, when the mother of Meleager, after killing her son and herself, is transformed into a bird.

Arachne and Minerva

Arachne is a young woman of no particular nobility who's known for her skill in weaving. She's so good at it that people think she must have been taught by the goddess Minerva, also a weaving wonder (see Chapter 9). But Arachne claims no one has taught her and issues a challenge to the goddess: Minerva can compete with her, and if Arachne loses, the goddess can do whatever she wants to her.

Minerva goes to see about this contest. All the other women around Arachne are terrified, but the girl insists on going through with the games. She and Minerva set up their looms and get to work. Minerva weaves a tapestry illustrating all the great things gods have done and the foolish mortals who've challenged them. Arachne depicts all the gods' failings, particularly the many women Jupiter has seduced. Arachne's tapestry is really good — so good that no one can find anything wrong with it. Minerva loses her temper and whacks Arachne on the head with the *shuttle* (a piece of wood used in weaving). Arachne feels humiliated and hangs herself.

Now Minerva relents a little; she tells Arachne that she can keep living, but she'll have to be suspended in the air forever. She sprinkles the girl with some magic herbs. And with that, Arachne turns into a spider! She lives the rest of her life suspended by a thread and always weaving.

TECHNICAL STUFF

The name Arachne is the origin of the word *arachnid,* the scientific name for spiders.

Hermaphroditus

The goddess Venus and the god Mercury have a son, whom they name Hermaphroditus after both of them (their Greek names, Aphrodite and Hermes). (See Chapter 9.) When Hermaphroditus is 15, a nymph named Salmacis sees him and falls in love. (*Nymphs* are . . . poorly clad young women who lark about the woods.) Hermaphroditus will have nothing to do with her — no kisses, hugs, or anything else. Salmacis lives in a beautiful pool with crystal clear waters. After Hermaphroditus rejects her, she leaves him by her pool and pretends to go away. Actually, though, she hides in the woods to watch him. He dips his toes in the pool and then decides to go for a swim. He strips naked, much to Salmacis's delight, and jumps in.

Salmacis now jumps in after him and wraps her arms and legs around his body. He fights her off, refusing to give her what she wants. So Salmacis cries to the gods, asking that nothing ever separate her from her unwilling lover. The gods grant her wish in a weird way: They merge Salmacis and Hermaphroditus together so that their joint body is both male and female.

Hermaphroditus gets his own wish out of this business. When he sees what has happened to him, he calls on his parents to grant him a favor: that any man who bathes in that pool have the same thing happen to him. Venus and Mercury pity their son and grant his wish. From then on, according to Ovid, any man who swims in that pool loses half his masculinity.

The Calydonian boar hunt

One year, King Oeneus of Calydon forgets to give anything to Diana, the goddess of the hunt and the countryside, while giving annual offerings to the gods. She's offended and lets a giant wild boar loose in the countryside to punish the people. This boar's as big as a bull and has tusks like an elephant's; it also breathes fire. It tramples down the plants in the fields, destroys the vines, and kills flocks of sheep.

Super heroes to the rescue

A hero named Meleager decides to take care of the giant, fire-breathing boar problem. He gets together a group of other heroes, many of whom appear in their own stories: Jason, Theseus and Pirithous, Peleus (Achilles's dad), Nestor (who appears as an old man in the *Iliad*), the twins Castor and Pollux, and the woman warrior Atalanta were part of the team. Meleager has a crush on Atalanta. (See Chapter 6 for more on many of those heroes.)

The warriors chase the boar into the forest, where they mostly fail to hurt it with their spears. It even kills one of them. As it's running away, Atalanta shoots it with an arrow, much to the embarrassment of the guys. The hero Ancaeus goes after it with an axe, but it gores him in the groin, and all his insides fall out. Theseus and Jason both throw spears at it with no success, and then Meleager throws two spears, one after the other. The first misses, but the second sticks in the boar's back. Now everyone runs up and stabs the beast, both to make sure it's dead and so they can say they've helped kill it.

The spoiled spoils of the hunt

Meleager presents Atalanta with the boar's head, tusks, and skin, but two of the men get angry and take them away from her; what can a mere woman have done to deserve that honor? Meleager gets angry and stabs both of them with his sword.

As (bad) luck would have it, those two men are Meleager's uncles, his mother's brothers. When Meleager was just born, his mother learned that he'd die when a particular log on the fire burnt up completely. She'd snatched it out of the fire and kept it in a safe place. But her love for her brothers is so strong that she decides to get the log and throw it in the fire. Meleager dies as it burns up. His mom then kills herself at his grave.

Ovid's Lovers

Ovid loved romance. In fact, before he wrote *Metamorphoses,* he published a book called *The Art of Love*. So it's no surprise that *Metamorphoses* is full of stories of lovers, in infinite variety. A few of them show up again and again in later literature and art.

Pygmalion and Galatea

The sculptor Pygmalion hates women. He'll have nothing to do with them. Well, almost nothing. He does like to look at them and decides to make a sculpture of a perfectly beautiful woman. He works and works at it until it's more beautiful than any living woman.

This statue becomes the focus of Pygmalion's existence. He kisses and hugs it, dresses it up in pretty clothes, and even brings it little presents. He puts it to bed at night, tucked in under blankets like a doll. And he decides he wants a woman in his life after all.

Venus, goddess of love and beauty, gets wind of this strange relationship and is impressed that a mortal has come up with a new and unusual kind of love. On Venus's feast day, Pygmalion goes to her temple to ask the goddess to help him find a woman just like his statue. The flames on the altar jump up when he prays, which looks like a good sign. Then he goes back home.

There stands his statue, more enticing than ever. He puts his arms around it as usual and kisses its lips. But something different happens this time: The statue starts kissing him back! He feels it all over, and the cold stone turns warm and soft as he touches it. He looks into its eyes, and the statue-woman smiles at him. You can witness the representation of this magical moment in Figure 11-1.

Now that Pygmalion's statue is a woman, she and Pygmalion marry. They have a daughter and name her Paphos, and later Venus's favorite city takes that for its name, too.

©The Met Museum

FIGURE 11-1: *Pygmalion and Galatea,* painted by Jean-Léon Gérôme.

TECHNICAL STUFF

We call this story "Pygmalion and Galatea," but Ovid doesn't give Pygmalion's statue-wife a name. The name Galatea seems to have been added in the Renaissance, but it's a common convention now. If you read a translation of Ovid, you can probably find a reference to Galatea in either the table of contents or the index, even though her name doesn't appear in the text. Another Galatea appears in Greek myths — a sea-nymph with whom a Cyclops falls in love — but she's not the same as Pygmalion's wife.

Bernard Shaw's play *Pygmalion* is about an English gentleman who transforms a poor street girl into a fine lady, mainly by dressing her up and giving her lessons in elocution to get rid of her pronounced accent. This play was the basis for the movie *My Fair Lady.*

Orpheus and Eurydice

Orpheus is the son of one of the Muses. He's the greatest musician ever to walk the earth. When he plays, all things on earth, right down to the rocks and rivers, stop to listen to him. You can see Orpheus in Figure 11-2.

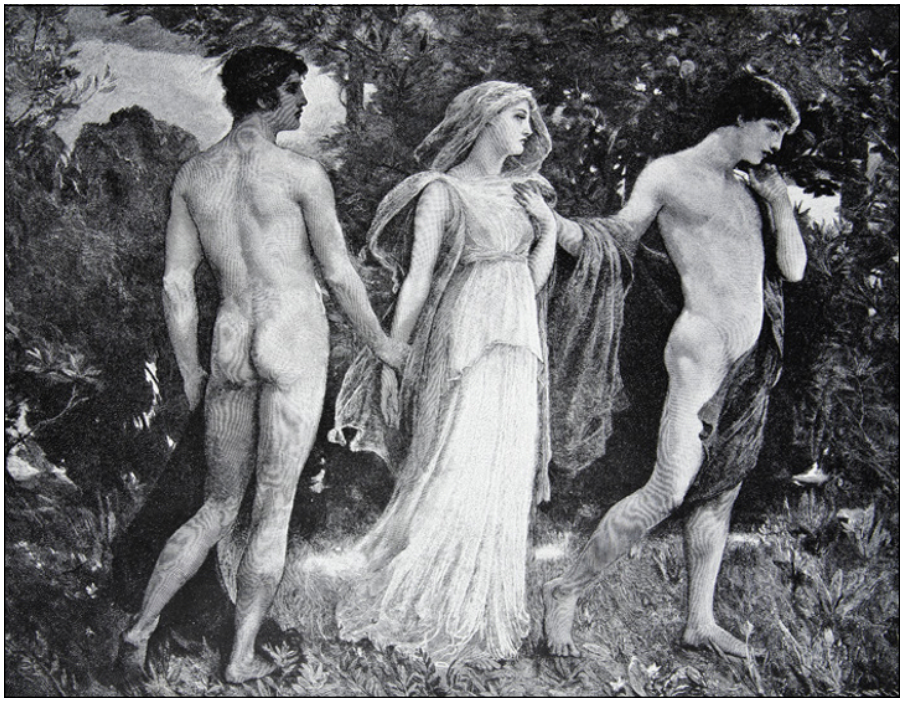

FIGURE 11-2: Orpheus, Eurydice, and Hades.

© *Shutterstock*

Orpheus marries a woman named Eurydice. Right after their wedding, a snake bites her, and she drops dead. Eurydice goes straight to the underworld, but Orpheus doesn't want to let her go. He decides he'll go down to the underworld and get her back.

The power of music gets him through. The three-headed watchdog Cerberus, a guard of the underworld, goes to sleep when he plays. Sisyphus (damned to roll a stone uphill for eternity for trying to cheat death) stops rolling his stone, Tantalus (damned to be surrounded by water and fruit that he cannot eat as punishment for cannibalism) for a moment isn't thirsty, and even the Furies (the goddesses who punish mortals who offend the gods) weep at the beauty of the song.

Not even the king of the dead can resist Orpheus's music. He tells Orpheus he can have Eurydice, but on one condition: She'll walk behind him up to the world of the living, and he can't look back at her until they're both out of the underworld.

Orpheus starts walking back home. He can hear Eurydice walking behind him. It drives him crazy, but he resists the temptation to look back until he's almost out. Just as he steps into the daylight, he turns around. Eurydice is right there, but she isn't all the way out of the underworld yet. As he reaches out to touch her, she disappears.

Orpheus wanders the earth alone, playing music to himself and the rocks and the trees. One day a band of wine-crazed *Maenads,* wild women who worship the wine god Dionysus (see Chapter 4), find him and rip him to pieces. They scatter his limbs, but his head floats down a river to the sea, singing as it goes; it washes up on the island of Lesbos. Orpheus goes to the underworld a second time, where he's reunited with Eurydice forever.

TIP

The Broadway musical *Hadestown* is a retelling of this story, as is the opera *Orpheus in the Underworld* by Jacques Offenbach.

Pyramus and Thisbe

Pyramus is the best-looking young man in town and Thisbe the most beautiful girl. They live next door to one another, and their apartments share a common wall. They're in love, but their parents won't let them marry.

The frustrated lovers find a crack in the wall that separates them, and every day they whisper through it. When they go to bed at night, they kiss the crack in the wall instead of kissing each other.

One day, they decide to sneak out and get together. They plan to meet under a mulberry tree at the Tomb of Ninus after dark. Thisbe gets there first. She waits, but Pyramus doesn't come. Suddenly she sees a lion coming to drink from a spring by the tomb and runs away to hide, dropping her cloak as she flees.

The lion has just killed an animal, and its mouth is bloody. It pounces on the cloak and tears it a little before heading back home. Sure enough, this moment is when Pyramus turns up. He sees Thisbe's cloak torn and bloody and jumps to the conclusion that the lion has killed her. In despair, he pulls out his sword and stabs himself.

Now Thisbe comes back. She finds her lover lying on the ground bleeding to death. She gathers him in her arms and says goodbye; he opens his eyes and recognizes her as he dies. Then Thisbe sees his sword lying on the ground and stabs herself, too. She dies next to Pyramus.

Their parents relent after this incident and put their children's ashes together in one urn. And the blood-red berries on the mulberry tree, whose color changed from white to red as Pyramus's blood soaked its roots, symbolizes their eternal love.

Does this story sound familiar? The story of Pyramus and Thisbe must have been one of William Shakespeare's favorite tales. Not only does *Romeo and Juliet* borrow much of its plot, but *A Midsummer Night's Dream* also features a very funny performance of it for a royal wedding.

Cupid and Psyche

This story does not come from Ovid, but another similar *mythographer* (writer or collector of myths) named Apuleius. It's one of the best-known Roman myths, and like Ovid's stories, explains how love and the soul came to be united.

Psyche, whose name means "soul," is the most beautiful of three sisters, the daughters of a king. She's so beautiful that people compare her to Venus, goddess of love, and even begin to give her the tribute they used to give Venus. This ticks the goddess off.

Venus calls Cupid, her son, and asks him to shoot Psyche with his arrows and thus make her fall in love with some monster or horrible oaf of a man. He says he will, but the instant he lays eyes on the girl, he gets distracted, shoots himself, and falls hopelessly in love with her.

Cupid's arrow changes the plan

Venus doesn't know what's gone wrong with her plan. She assumes that because she sent Cupid off with specific instructions, young Psyche will soon lose her heart to some vile creature. But she doesn't . . . she doesn't seem to fall in love with anyone at all. And no one falls in love with her! Men come to admire her beauty, but none of them ever think to propose to her. This situation frustrates her parents, who are ready to marry her off.

Her father goes off to the oracle of Apollo (see Chapter 4) to find out what the problem is. Cupid has told Apollo all about his love for Psyche, and Apollo has agreed to help him out. So the oracle gives Psyche's dad some instructions: Dress Psyche in mourning clothes and send her to sit alone on a rocky hill. She's to wait until her new husband arrives (the good news). This new husband will be a winged serpent (the bad news).

Psyche's family is devastated; they're sure the dragon will kill her. But Psyche says she'd rather die this way than spend her life suffering and alone because Venus is jealous of her. So she dresses in mourning, says goodbye to her family, and sits on the hilltop waiting for the end.

The lights are on, but is anybody home?

While waiting on the hilltop (see the preceding section), Psyche suddenly feels the wind pick her up and carry her through the air until she lands in a grassy meadow, where she falls asleep. When she wakes up, she sees a beautiful mansion that looks fit for a god. It seems empty.

Psyche enters the house and hears voices speaking to her, telling her that it's her house and they're her servants. She can't see them, but they wait on her hand and foot. She spends the day alone and then goes to bed to wait for her husband. She isn't dreading him as much as she was the day before.

After she gets in bed and blows out the lamp, she feels a man get in with her. She can't see him, but he sure doesn't feel like a dragon. They make love all night, and Psyche decides her husband isn't too bad.

But she never can see him. Every day she spends alone, and every night she sleeps with her unseen husband. She wonders who he is and what he looks like.

Here comes trouble

One night, Psyche's husband tells her that her sisters are coming to the hill where she disappeared to lay flowers on her grave. He doesn't want her to go but grudgingly allows it when she begs.

Her sisters ask a lot of questions about her new husband and finally persuade her that he may be a terrible monster. Why not spy on him with a lamp by night? And just in case he is a monster, better bring a knife!

She takes her sisters' advice: She gets a lamp and knife and hides them by the bed. That night after her husband falls asleep, she picks up the knife and lights the lamp.

And there in her bed lays not a monster but the handsomest young man she's ever seen. Her hand trembles, and some hot oil drops onto his shoulder. He wakes up, looks at her, and immediately disappears. Psyche runs after him into the night. She can't see him, but she does hear his voice. He says that he's Cupid and that her lack of trust has ruined their marriage.

Mommy-in-law dearest gets involved

Cupid goes home to his mother to ask her to fix his burn (see the preceding section). When Venus hears how he got it, she leaves him in pain and goes after revenge against Psyche.

Psyche has been looking all over for her husband. She finally goes to Venus herself. Venus scornfully gives her humiliating tasks to do. Psyche has to sort grains of wheat from dirt, find a golden fleece, and fetch a beauty-cream from the underworld. Finally, Cupid's burn heals, Venus is satisfied, and the gods agree to make Psyche a goddess in her own right.

4 One Big Family Feud: Norse and Northern European Mythology

IN THIS PART . . .

Familiarize yourself with the gods and goddesses of Norse mythology and how they made the world out of a big tree, warred with each other, and saw the end of the world.

Read up on the big stories of Norse and northern European mythology.

Gather round the English mythology of King Arthur and his Knights of the Round Table, who stopped by Camelot from time to time when not having adventures abroad.

Look at the creation of the world according to the Irish, along with their heroes Queen Maeve, Finn MacCool, and Saint Patrick.

IN THIS CHAPTER

- Living in the frozen north
- Creating (and ending) the world
- Getting to know the Norse gods and goddesses

Chapter 12

Snow, Ice, and Not Very Nice: Norse Deities

The term *Norse* is short for *Norsemen*, which refers to the folks who lived up north in Europe, around Scandinavia; they spoke a language that was in the family of German and English. You may be more familiar with the term *Viking* (thanks to the many shows and movies about them). The name "Viking" is a term for those Norse people who sailed around the cold seas of northern Europe and raided towns and villages. The Vikings were the seafaring folk who took northern Europe by storm between the years 780 and 1070 CE. The Vikings are the source of Norse mythology: cold and dark tales from a land of snow and ice.

In this chapter, we bring you to the beginning and end of the world, according to the Norse, and introduce to you the notorious troublemakers and celebrated heroes along the way. These gods and heroes live in a mythological world that is very different from those of the Greek and Roman gods . . . more violent (if that's possible), and certainly colder. Marvel may have convinced you that Thor is a hunky, blond Australian, but myths and poems paint a different picture. This chapter shows you the Norse gods and monsters as the Vikings imagined them.

The People and Their Poems: Norse Origins and Oral Tradition

The Vikings' ancestors had many myths that told of conflicts between deities and monsters; the gods gradually brought order to the chaos that the monsters and giants constantly strove to create. Scandinavians kept many of these stories in the form of spoken poetry. Their myths were suited to their restless ways and life in a harsh climate.

A Viking life for me

The Vikings were descendants of Germanic people who had lived during the Roman Empire in the area that's now Germany. These folks spread into Denmark, Norway, and Sweden and eventually colonized much of the British Isles, parts of Spain, France, Russia, Iceland, and Greenland. They even settled in North America. Figure 12-1 shows a map of where these cold-weather folks lived.

FIGURE 12-1: Northern Europe and the north Atlantic.

For all their warlike reputation, the Norse people really spent most of their time in peaceful pursuits: farming, hunting, fishing, and telling stories to pass the long winter nights. Their myths reflect the hardship of living in the far north — gods

must travel vast distances from one house to another over rugged terrain, plagued by snowstorms and hunger.

The people in Norway, Sweden, and Denmark kept their old religion long after Christianity was established in continental Europe and the British Isles; the Scandinavians converted to Christianity gradually over three centuries, from the 800s to the 1100s CE.

A song to pass the time on a long, cold night

The people of the north loved poetry, and poets were important members of the community. Most myths were told and retold as song, with everyone sitting around the fire on long winter nights and the poet in the center singing for hours about the characters everyone knew and loved. It was the original streaming service!

REMEMBER

Getting a completely consistent view of the Norse *cosmology* (theory regarding the nature of the universe) is impossible. Oral poems change in the telling, like a game of telephone. People started telling stories about the Germanic gods centuries earlier, and these gradually turned into the Norse gods and goddesses. Most Norse poems weren't written down until sometime around the tenth century CE, and although the stories started to solidify at that point, many different versions of them were still floating around.

Norse mythology has several literary sources. The *Prose Edda* and other works written by Iceland's Snorri Sturluson (1179–1241 CE) are extremely important. The *Poetic Edda,* a collection of poems from Iceland, is the source of many Norse myths. The Icelandic sagas such as the *Saga of Volsungs* (see Chapter 13) are also important. And then you have actual histories, many of which were written by visitors to northern Europe. All these origins build a picture of pre-Christian Scandinavia.

TECHNICAL STUFF

The *Prose Edda* connects the Norse mythologies to the larger world of mythology and history. This practice, making all mythologies connect and make sense, is called *euhemerizing*. It can result in surprising connections! For example, the *Prose Edda* says that one of the daughters of Priam, the King of Troy (see Chapter 7), married Memnon, the King of Ethiopia who came to the Trojan War as an ally of Troy. Their son was the Norse God Trór or Thor, who grew up in the Greek land of Thrace before moving up north. So according to Snorri Sturluson's 12th century CE book, Thor's father was African!

Ashes to Ashes and Dust to Dwarves: Creation of the World

Norse myth is full stories, too many to tell here. Here's a quick version of how the world came about.

In the beginning was a big emptiness called *Ginningagap.* North of it was the frozen *Niflheim,* and to south lay the burning hot *Muspell.* Ginningagap had been icy but now was warming up. The ice began to melt, and as water dripped down some of the drops turned into an evil frost giant called Ymir. He was the ancestor of all frost giants.

Ymir fell asleep. While he slept, sweat dripped from his armpit and turned into a male and female; these were not humans but the ancestors of the gods and other supernatural beings. More ice melted, and this water turned into a cow named *Audumla.* Ymir drank her milk, and she licked the salty ice. As she licked, she uncovered a giant in the form of a human man; his name was Buri.

Buri (somehow) had a son named Bor. Bor married a frost giant named Bestla, and they had three sons: Odin, Vili, and Ve. These three sons hated Ymir and eventually killed him. So much blood came from his body that it drowned all the frost giants except for one, Bergelmir, and his wife. These two escaped the flood in a boat made of a hollow tree trunk.

TIP

If you've explored some of the other chapters in this book, you may notice a recurring theme. Many mythologies (not just Norse) include a story about a great flood. Ovid (see Chapter 11) tells of a global flood; the Hebrew Bible and Mesopotamian mythology also talk about floods (see Chapter 17).

Molding and divvying up the world

Odin and his brothers, now gods, carried Ymir's body to the center of Ginningagap and made the world from his body. They used his flesh for the earth, his unbroken bones for mountains, and his broken bones for rocks. They made an ocean out of his blood and put it around the world in a ring. They put Ymir's skull in the sky and set a dwarf under each corner; their names were East, West, North, and South. They put sparks and embers in the sky to form the sun, moon, stars, and planets. They threw Ymir's brains in the sky to make clouds.

The gods set aside an area of Ginningagap called *Jotunheim* for the giants. They enclosed the nicest area of Ginningagap with Ymir's eyebrows and called it *Midgard;* that's where humans live.

Now the gods made humans: They found two fallen trees and turned them into a man named Ask and a woman named Embla. All people are descended from them.

Now the gods saw that maggots grew in Ymir's dead flesh. They turned the maggots into dwarves and gave them the caves and caverns to live in.

Last, the gods built *Asgard*, a mighty fortress high over Midgard. The two regions were linked by *Bifrost*, a flaming rainbow bridge. All the *Aesir*, the guardians of humans, crossed the bridge and moved into Asgard. According to the Norse, Asgard has 12 gods, 12 goddesses, and a bunch of other Aesir up there.

REMEMBER

In all, the Norse cosmos has nine worlds:

- Alfheim, home of the light elves
- Asgard, home of the gods and goddesses
- Jotunheim, a place for the giants
- Midgard, the realm for humans
- Niflheim, home of the dead
- Nidavellir, where the dwarves live
- Muspelheim, a world of fire
- Svartalfheim, home of the dark elves
- Vanaheim, where the Vanir (the old fertility gods) lived until they merged with the Aesir

Living in one big tree house

The Norse imagined the universe in three main parts joined by a magic "world tree," *Yggdrasill.* Its three roots burrowed into Asgard, Jotunheim, and Niflheim (see the preceding section). Figure 12-2 shows how it all fits together.

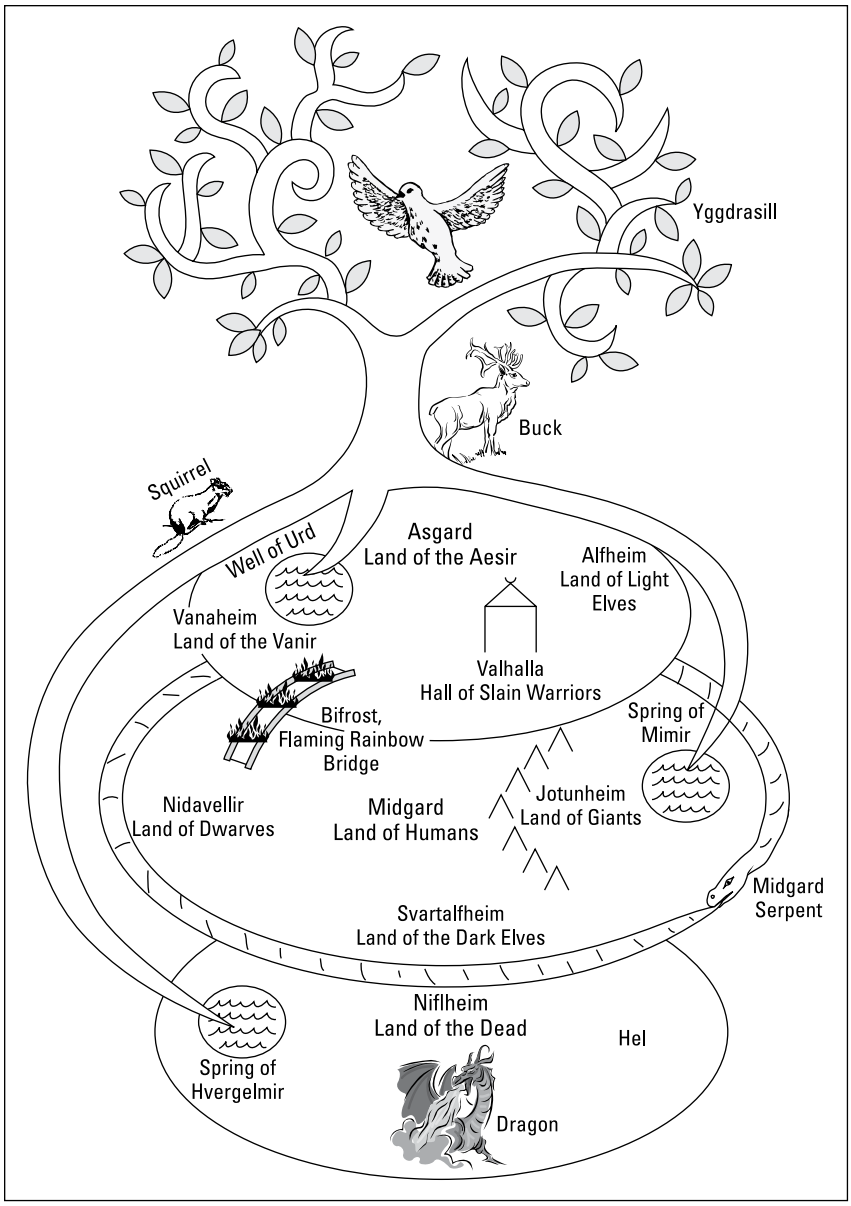

FIGURE 12-2: Yggdrasill, the tree of life, and the nine worlds of the Norse cosmology.

Each of these realms, connected by the roots of Yggdrasill, had a spring under it. An eagle and a hawk sat in the branches of the world tree, a squirrel scurried on its trunk, deer nibbled at it, and a dragon down below tried to eat it. Yggdrasill had no beginning and will survive Ragnarök, the series of events that will mark the end of the world.

The Good, the Bad, and the Mortal: Norse Deities

The Norse gods came in two flavors, the *Vanir* and the *Aesir*. The Vanir are the older fertility gods; they include Freyr, Freya, and Njord. The Aesir are more modern warlike gods, including Odin and Thor. One story tells of a war between the Vanir and the Aesir after the creation; the gods made a truce and exchanged members, and so they merged, to be known afterward as Aesir. Scholars think this story describes a time when two cults competed with one another and ultimately united. (A *cult*, when anthropologists and historians use the word, is a group of people who come together with shared religious practices and beliefs.)

An odd thing about the Norse deities is that they aren't immortal. They can and do die, unlike the Greek immortals up on Mount Olympus (see Chapters 3 and 4). Their interests aren't the same as those of humans; they help and hurt people as they choose. The deities exist to battle the monsters and the outer darkness, and part of their interest in people is gathering enough warriors to help them fight the last battle.

Norse gods: A rough and tough bunch

If the stories about them are anything to go on, the Norse gods spent most of their time wandering around with each other looking for interesting things to do. In this section, we introduce you to the main men of Norse mythology, Odin the King, Loki the trickster, the mighty Thor, Freyr the fertile, and the brave Tyr.

King Odin

Odin is the king of the gods. He's the father of most of them and in some accounts created everything — heaven, earth, and humans; this accounts for his nickname, "Allfather." He has a special high seat called Hlidskjalf, from which he can see everything in all the worlds. Only he and his wife, Frigg, are supposed to sit up there, but occasionally other deities sneak in when no one's looking. Figure 12-3 shows what Odin looks like.

Odin is immensely wise, but his wisdom didn't come cheaply. He bought a drink from a Spring of Wisdom at a high price: one of his eyes. This drink made him want more wisdom, so he spent nine days hanging from the tree Yggdrasill, pierced by a spear, to get even wiser; during this experience, he symbolically died and was reborn. Odin apparently was embarrassed by his empty eye socket, because he usually covered it up with a deep hood. Whenever an old man with a deep hood strides into a saga, you can pretty easily identify him as Odin.

FIGURE 12-3: One-eyed Odin.

©Adobe Stock

According to some sources, people who worshipped Odin practiced human sacrifice by hanging their victims from trees and piercing them with spears, reenacting Odin's ordeal. But this may not be true; it might be anti-Odin slander. The story of Odin's hanging on Yggdrasill has elements in common with Christ's crucifixion, but scholars don't think the Norse poets were especially influenced by the Christian story.

Odin is god of war, a role that he inherited from the two older Germanic war gods Woden and Tiwaz. He loves to stir up war among humans. Slain warriors got to party in his hall, *Valhalla;* they were brought up there by the *Valkyries,* warrior women who chose only the most heroic for this honor.

A cult of warriors called *Berserkers* used to go into battle dressed in bear skins, out of their minds with battle, fighting like demons. (The word *berserk* translates as "bear-shirt.")

Odin is also the god of poetry, perhaps one reason he appears in so many poems. He was responsible for bringing the magical *mead* (liquor made of honey) of poetry to Asgard, the realm of the gods. A giant had stolen this mead and sent his daughter to guard it. Odin burrowed into her cave in the form of a snake and then turned back into his handsome self. He spent three nights with her, after which he sucked down all the mead and held it in his mouth. He turned into an eagle, flew back to Asgard, and spit out the mead into a pot for all the other gods.

Loki the trickster

In modern times, Norse gods such as Loki are a part of popular culture. Loki first entered the Marvel Universe in 1949 in the sixth issue of a comic called *Venus.* He re-entered as Thor's bitter enemy in 1962, in a version more or less like how he appears in the films of the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU).

In the Norse myths of old, Loki sometimes shows up as a trickster, getting himself and the gods out of a tight spot and good for a laugh. Other times he's evil and spiteful, fighting on the giants' side in the battle at the end of the world.

Loki is the son of two giants but grew up as Odin's foster brother. (Not Thor's, as Marvel would have you believe.) In stories about Loki, whether he's a god or a giant is hard to figure out, because he behaved like both — sometimes he was a helpful friend in Asgard, and sometimes he was most definitely the gods' enemy. He was unpredictable and thus supplied an element of instability to an otherwise boring existence. Lots of Norse myths involve Loki getting himself or all the gods into trouble out of sheer meddlesomeness.

Loki can change shape at will and often did; for example, he turned into a flea to steal Freya's necklace from her, and he turned into a salmon to escape the wrath of the gods after he caused the death of the god Balder. (Check out "The death of Balder" later in the chapter for that story.) Once a giant offered to build a wall around Asgard if he could have the goddess Freya as a wife. Just before the giant finished the job, Loki turned himself into a mare and lured away the giant's stallion, leaving the giant unable to complete the wall and claim his prize. Loki left Asgard and returned several months later leading an eight-legged foal (a baby horse), the child he had borne with the stallion. (Species-shifting *and* sex-shifting!) He gave the foal, named Sleipnir, to Odin.

That horse wasn't Loki's only child. Though he had a wife, he occasionally ran off to have flings with a giantess named Angrboda. They had three children, all of them trouble:

- Fenrir, their first son, is a wolf. He grew huge, and the gods decided they'd have to chain him up. Tyr played a key role in this job — as we describe in the section "Tyr" later in the chapter.

  The *Harry Potter* novels have a terrifying werewolf named Fenrir Greyback clearly based on Loki's wolf-son.

- Jormungand, their second son, is a giant snake. Odin threw him into the ocean surrounding Midgard. He grew so big that he encircled the whole world and bit his own tail. People called him the *Midgard Serpent.*

- Hel, their daughter, is alive from the waist up and dead from the waist down. Odin threw her into Niflheim, the underworld, and she became goddess of the dead.

All three of these monstrous creatures were waiting for the end of the world, Ragnarök, when they'd wreak havoc.

Thor the thunderous

Thor is the son of Odin and Earth. Although Odin stands for violence and war, Thor represents order; he's the god people called on if they wanted stability. He's immensely strong and manly. He carried around a huge hammer, called Mjölnir, which he used to keep the giants in line. No matter how far he flung it, it always returned to his hand (like a boomerang), and he could make it small enough to hide inside his shirt.

Thor has a bushy red beard, a huge appetite, and a quick temper, though he doesn't stay angry for long. He's the patron of peasants and the god of thunder and lightning; the wheels of his chariot made thunder, and lightning came from a whetstone lodged in his skull.

Once, the king of the frost giants stole Thor's hammer and refused to give it back unless he could have Freya, whom we discuss in the later section "Freya, goddess of love," for his wife. The gods agreed, but then they tricked the giant. Thor dressed up as a bride and Loki (see the preceding section) as his bridesmaid, and the two of them went to the giants' hall. The giants invited them to sit down at the table, and Thor proceeded to devour all the food and drink all the mead in a most unbridelike manner. Loki claimed that "Freya" was so excited about the wedding that "she" hadn't eaten in days. Captivated, the giant king called for Thor's hammer so that they could swear their marriage vows on it. Thor instantly grabbed it, ripped off his veil, and killed all the giants at the feast.

Thor first showed up in the Marvel Universe comics in 1951 but really arrived as he appears in the movies in the 83rd issue of *Journey into Mystery* in August 1962.

Freyr the fertile

Freyr is the god of plenty. He seems to have descended from the Earth Mother whom the ancient *Danes* (people from Denmark and a sub-set of the Norse people) worshipped (and who had somehow changed sex along the way). He decided when the sun would shine, or the rain would fall and therefore whether the earth would be fruitful.

People turned to Freyr when they wanted wealth or children. The statue of Freyr in Uppsala, Sweden, had an enormous penis — clearly people knew what they wanted out of him! His favorite toys, a magical ship and boar, were also long-standing fertility symbols.

Tyr the brave

Tyr is the son of Odin. He's the bravest of the Aesir, the war gods. In older myths, he was Tiwaz, a Germanic god of war and Odin's father. His importance faded over the years, and other myths arose about Odin's parentage.

Tyr has only one hand. He lost his right one binding the wolf Fenrir, Loki's son. Fenrir had been getting bigger; the gods were worried that he'd kill Odin, so they decided to chain him up. The wolf broke the first two chains they put on him, but then they got the dwarves to make another, stronger one. This chain, which looked like a silk ribbon, was named *Gleipnir.*

When Fenrir saw it, he feared it could hold him, so he said he'd only let the gods tie him up if one of them would put a hand in his mouth. Only Tyr was brave enough. He put his right hand in Fenrir's mouth. The gods tied the wolf with Gleipnir, and though Fenrir struggled mightily, he couldn't break his bonds. He bit off Tyr's hand, but he was stuck. The gods tied him to a giant boulder that they sank deep into the earth.

Divinely supporting characters

The Norse pantheon includes several other gods. Here are a few of them:

- Njord governs the sea and the ocean winds and is the guardian of ships and sailors. He's the father of Freyr and Freya.
- Heimdall is watchman of the gods. No one knows exactly what he's all about, but he's associated with the sea. He's the son of nine maidens (or maybe nine waves). He has a horn named Gjall whose sound could be heard throughout the nine worlds.
- Balder the Beautiful is the wisest, sweetest, and most merciful of the gods; after he pronounced a judgment, it couldn't be altered. His death started the conflict that would bring about the end of the world, as we explain in the later section "The death of Balder."

Norse goddesses: Tough, sexy, and equal

Norse women had the same legal rights as men, and they were a tough bunch. Outspoken women appear in many poems. Goddesses, too, have minds of their own and are equal to the gods.

Unfortunately, few poems survive in which goddesses play a large role. But in this section, we give you a roster of some of the powerful women the Norse revered. Freya, goddess of love, the wife and mother Frigg, the half-dead Hel, and others.

Freya, goddess of love

Freya is the goddess of love and of lust. Every male who saw her wanted to have sex with her, and many of them did. She's fabulously beautiful, dripping with gold jewelry. When she cries, she weeps tears of gold; after a particularly long fit of weeping, the floor would be covered with gold. (Which happened often, because she was always being promised in marriage to some horrible creature or another.) She owned a falcon skin and used it to turn herself into a bird for occasional visits to the underworld. Check out Figure 12-4 to get a look at her.

FIGURE 12-4: The beautiful goddess Freya, looming over some dwarves in a cave.

© Wikipedia

Her most famous possession was the Necklace of the Brisings. Freya got it from the four dwarves who made it; their price was that she spend one night with each of them. She really wanted that necklace, so she agreed. When Loki found out how Freya had gotten it, he told Odin, who ordered Loki to steal the necklace from her. Loki turned into a flea and bit her cheek as she slept. She turned her head, and he undid the clasp. Odin refused to return the necklace until Freya agreed to stir up war among humans.

Freya is also a war goddess. She went to war riding in a chariot pulled by two cats. She and Odin divided dead warriors on a battlefield; half went to Valhalla and half to her hall, *Sessrumnir.*

Frigg, wife and mother

Frigg is Odin's wife. She's a daughter of Earth and, like Freya, probably evolved from the ancient Earth/Mother goddess. Like Odin, she can foresee the fates of humans. Women in labor called on her for help.

TECHNICAL STUFF

Scholars love to see similarities among different myths. With the Norse deities, they say that Frigg and Freya represent two sides of womanhood, Frigg as wife and mother and Freya as mistress and seductress, just like Hera and Aphrodite in Greek myths. Artemis the young virgin is the third component of the Greek trio; she isn't obvious in Norse myths, though Skadi, the goddess of skiing, bowhunting, winter, and mountains, may have once occupied that place.

Hel: Half dead

Hel is goddess of the dead. She's a daughter of Loki and the giantess Angrboda. Her appearance is unusual: From the waist up, she's pink and warm, but from the hips down her flesh is green and half-decayed. Hel has her citadel (also called Hel) in Niflheim. Everyone ends up here after they die.

REMEMBER

Hel, the citadel of the dead, isn't the same as the Christian hell. You don't have to be particularly bad to go there, and though it isn't what you'd call "nice," it isn't a place of everlasting torment, either — though it is kind of cold.

Minor (but still powerful!) goddesses

Some of the other goddesses are:

- Idun is the guardian of the apples of youth. The gods had to eat these apples to stay young. Loki helped the giants steal them from her, and all the gods aged overnight. But they got them back, once again with Loki's help.
- Skadi is the daughter of the giant Thiazi and the goddess of skis. She married the sea god Njord, but their marriage broke down because she wanted to live in the frozen mountains and he wanted to live at the fertile seaside.
- Sif is Thor's wife. Loki cut off her beautiful blonde hair for a (sick) joke but made it up to her by getting the dwarves to make her hair of gold.
- The three *Norns* are the goddesses of destiny, who shape the fates of humans: Urd (Fate, sometimes considered the past), Verdandi (the present), and Skuld (the future). They sometimes appear as weavers, like the Greek Fates (see Chapter 5).

Here be dragons (and giants and dwarves): Some other magical beings

The gods and goddesses didn't have a monopoly on magic; the Norse cosmos was full of fantastic creatures. Most of them didn't have a very good relationship with the gods in Asgard, though they did manage some peaceful interaction.

Giants

Giants were mostly evil; they were constantly trying to get the better of the gods and goddesses. But at the same time, they still had almost normal (if somewhat tense) interactions with the deities. Thor and Loki spent a couple of days traveling around with giants and visiting the giants in their hall.

The word *giant* of course implies great size; but the Norse word "jötunn" seems to cover a wide range of supernatural, not-human beings who are not quite gods. Evidently gods and "giants" were (or could be) more or less the same size, because the gods had a number of sexual relationships with giants. Giants were forever asking to marry the beautiful goddess Freya, and both Odin and Loki had giant mistresses; in fact, Loki himself may be a giant. At the end of the world, the line between the giants and the gods is most clearly drawn; then they're most definitely on opposite sides.

TOLKIEN'S INSPIRATION

J. R. R. Tolkien of *Lord of the Rings* fame took lots of his Middle Earth material straight out of Norse mythology, especially his propensity for naming inanimate objects such as swords; that appears in lots of northern European stories. The names of dwarves who appear in *The Hobbit* (and of Gandalf the wizard) come straight from Snorri Sturluson's *Prose Edda.* The name Mordor means "murder" in Old English.

Tolkien studied classics and English literature at Oxford and, after a stint working on the *Oxford English Dictionary,* went on to teach Old English and English literature there. He was interested only in the oldest English literature, particularly *Beowulf,* a poem about the exploits of the hero Beowulf in sixth century CE Denmark and Sweden. *Beowulf* was written in old English, but its tale reflects Norse myth and culture. (Chapter 13 tells his story.)

Dwarves

The dwarves of Norse myth are (often mean-spirited and unfriendly to humans) little humanlike creatures who live underground. (Sunlight turned them to stone.) They're the finest metalworkers and can create magical objects, such as Freya's necklace and Thor's hammer. Their gifts and usefulness inspired the gods to treat them kindly. Dwarves can cohabit with deities, too; four of them slept with the goddess Freya, their price for the necklace of the Brisings (which we cover in the earlier section "Freya, goddess of love."

Other fanciful beasties

The Norse cosmology is also populated with various other magical creatures. You have elves, light and dark. The dark elves seem to be similar to dwarves, unfriendly and suspicious of humans; the light elves are good. You have trolls, big monstrous beings who are definitely unfriendly to civilized humans; Thor occasionally did battle with them. You have dragons — see Chapter 23 for more about them.

Ragnarök: The End of the World

Norse myths have a very clear description of the end of the world. The story is a bit confusing because Ragnarök, the big last battle and the destruction of the world, hasn't happened yet, though the events leading up to it have. That timeline oddity aside, the story is like other myths describing the end of the world, followed by the resurrection of the human race by two survivors.

The Norse were really aware of fate and life's impermanence, and the tale reflects that. Long before Ragnarök happens, the god Odin knows how it will end; as part of his constant quest for knowledge, he once asked the dead how he'd die, and they told him that the wolf Fenrir would eat him. Odin also knows that Loki the trickster is plotting to bring about the downfall of the good gods, and that he'll succeed. It's the gods' fate; they can't avoid it. You can read more about these and other characters from the following sections in "The Good, the Bad, and the Mortal: Norse Deities" earlier in the chapter.

The death of Balder

The end of the world began with the death of the nicest god, Balder, everyone's favorite. Balder's mother, Frigg, had traveled throughout the world and asked every animal, mineral, and plant to swear not to harm him. Everything except mistletoe did, but Frigg didn't worry about that (big mistake).

So the gods had a new game: They threw things at Balder and laughed uproariously when their missiles bounced off without hurting him. Everyone was happy except Loki, the god of mischief; he loved trouble and suffering, and seeing Balder immune to attack made him cranky. (Although in other stories Loki is a cooperative member of the gods of Asgard, at this point he's definitely their enemy. As we note earlier in the chapter, Loki can be hard to figure out.)

Loki got some mistletoe and shaped it into a dart. He gave the dart to Balder's blind brother Höd, who was feeling left out of the game, and helped him throw it. It hit Balder, who dropped dead. The brave god Hermod rode to Hel, the goddess of the dead, to ask her to return Balder, but she refused.

Everyone wanted to get back at Loki (who'd turned into a salmon to escape). The gods caught him, dragged him into a cave, and tied him to a rock. The goddess Skadi carried a snake into the cave and hung it above Loki so its venom would drip onto his face. Loki's faithful wife, Sigyn, stayed by his side, holding a bowl over his head to catch the venom. But when she had to empty the bowl, the venom dripped on him. Loki would writhe in pain during those moments, and his writhing caused earthquakes. So he lay, and so he'd remain until Ragnarök (see the following section).

REMEMBER

The death of Odin's son Balder is the beginning of the end because it forces the gods to see that Loki is their enemy and that their power is limited. The lines of battle are drawn, and you can easily see the two sides. The gods imprison Loki, but they now know that he and his three evil children (Fenrir, Hel, and the Midgard Serpent) will fight against them.

The final battle

Here's how the world will end: First, Midgard will have war for three winters. The family will break down — fathers will kill sons, brothers will kill brothers, mothers will seduce their sons, and brothers will seduce their sisters. Next will come three fierce winters with no summers between them.

Two wolves will eat the sun and the moon, and the stars will vanish. Trees and mountains will fall down, and the wolf Fenrir will run free. The sea will rise as the Midgard Serpent writhes around, working his way to dry land. The giants will set sail. Loki will set sail, too, in a boat full of the dead from Hel (the land of the dead, ruled by Loki's daughter, Hel).

Fenrir and the Midgard Serpent (Loki's sons) will advance side by side; Fenrir's lower jaw will scrape the ground as his upper teeth brush the sky, and the Midgard Serpent will spew venom everywhere, poisoning all the earth. All the giants, the dead, and all other members of the evil team will assemble.

Meanwhile, the gods will arm themselves and gather all their warriors from Valhalla. They'll march to meet the enemy, Odin and Thor at their head. Yggdrasill, the tree of life, will wave its limbs and shiver as two humans hide inside it.

Odin will attack the wolf Fenrir; after a long fight, Fenrir will swallow Odin, and that will be the end of the Allfather. The Midgard Serpent will go for Thor; they'll kill each other. The fire giant Surt will kill Freyr. Tyr and a fierce hound will kill one another, as will longtime enemies Loki and Heimdall. Odin's son Vidar will grab Fenrir's jaws and rip the wolf apart, avenging his father.

The fire giant Surt will fling fire in every direction, and everything in the nine worlds will burn up. Everyone and everything will perish, and the earth will sink into the sea.

The beginning after the end

Everyone will die in Ragnarök (see the preceding section) — that is, except for the two humans who hide in Yggdrasill: a man and a woman called Lif and Lifthrasir. (And a few gods who rise again, including Balder.) The earth will rise out of the sea again, lush and green, and the birds and fish will return. The two humans will have children, who will have children, and life will begin again.

IN THIS CHAPTER

- Following the escapades of the ambitious Volsung clan
- Killing monsters with Beowulf

Chapter 13

Heroes and Monsters: The Big Northern European Sagas

Sitting in the cold and dark all winter long, the people of Scandinavia and Northern Europe — people that include the Norsemen, Vikings, and Danes — had to do something to pass the time. So they wove complex tapestries, made elaborate pieces of metalwork, and made up poems. Every party had entertainment in the form of a *scop,* or poet, who'd chant for hours about the tales of great heroes and beautiful women; of dragons, monsters, and battles fought long ago; and of love affairs gone wrong.

The poets memorized these poems. Poems weren't written down; paper and ink were scarce, and most people couldn't read anyway. For hundreds of years, poets developed serious memory skills to retain incredibly long stories.

In this chapter, we do put those stories in writing. We give you a snapshot of the most famous poems, *Beowulf* and the *Saga of the Volsungs*, which were actually were combinations of history and legend. In Chapter 12 we talk about the body of mythology from Northern Europe in general; in this chapter we focus on a couple of big, organized stories that follow families and kingdoms through a distinct set of myths.

In the *Saga of the Volsungs,* verifiable people such as Attila the Hun and various actual ethnic groups turn up. Historical figures and events, including some mentioned by the historian Gregory of Tours, who lived in the 500s CE, get mentioned in *Beowulf.* A poet in *Beowulf* actually tells the story of the Volsungs at a party! But the stories also feature definite mythical elements, like all the monsters in *Beowulf* and Odin's frequent appearances in the *Saga of the Volsungs.* (Odin, the king of the gods in Norse mythology, tends to show up on earth from time to time to help heroes or to stir up trouble. Read more about him in Chapter 12.)

Scholars have debated the significance of Norse heroic tales for the last 200 years, but we can agree with the ancient listeners: They're really cool stories.

Binge-worthy Programming: The Saga of the Volsungs

A *saga* is a story that deals with the myths and legends of early Norse or Germanic kings; lots of sagas were written in Iceland between 1200 and 1400 CE. Nowadays the term can refer to any similar story.

The *Saga of the Volsungs,* or *Volsungsaga,* is the story of a family of heroes. The character who gives the saga its name, Volsung, makes only a brief appearance early in the tale, but he's important: All his descendants call themselves Volsungs, and they're the strongest, bravest, and most ambitious of heroes. Medieval Scandinavians would all have known this tale, with its dragon and ring of power and confused lovers. They also would've known what life under constant warfare was like; Vikings didn't exactly lead a peaceful existence. All this context would've made the *Volsungsaga* a crowd-pleaser.

An unknown author wrote down the *Saga of the Volsungs* in Iceland in the 13th century CE. Their story came from older Norse poetry and traditional lore. The story combines events from ancient wars with the Huns, Burgundians, Goths, and the mythic deeds of Sigurd the Dragonslayer and added betrayal, unrequited love, and the vengeance of a barbarian queen. The story is set somewhere in northern Europe during the fourth and fifth centuries CE.

Volsung family history

Once upon a time, the king of Hunland and his queen couldn't have a baby. Frigg, goddess of childbirth, asked Odin (see Chapter 12) to help them; Odin brought a

magical apple to the king, and the queen got pregnant. The king died in battle, and the queen was pregnant for six years without giving birth. (That poor woman!) She finally asked her servants to cut the child out of her body; her 6-year-old son kissed her before she died. His name was Volsung, and he was the ancestor of the Volsung race.

Volsung married, and he and his wife had twins, a girl named Signy and a boy named Sigmund. They had nine more sons after that. Volsung built a huge palace with a giant tree called Barnstock standing right in the middle of it, its branches reaching through the roof.

Trouble at Signy's wedding

Volsung gave daughter Signy to Siggeir, king of Gautland (a region of Sweden), to marry. During the wedding banquet, an old man with only one eye strode into the hall, stuck a sword into the tree Barnstock, challenged everyone to pull it out, and walked out again. All the warriors tried to pull the sword from the tree trunk, but no one could. Finally, Sigmund stepped forward and pulled it out easily. King Siggeir was angry because he had wanted the sword, and he vowed to get revenge.

REMEMBER

Whenever an old man with one eye shows up, you can bet it's Odin, king of the Norse gods.

The next day, Signy told her father that she didn't like her new husband, but he insisted that she go home with him. Husband and wife sailed away, and Siggeir invited all the Volsungs to come visit in three months. When they arrived, Siggeir attacked them, killed Volsung, and seized his ten sons. Signy begged him not to kill them, so he put them in stocks in the woods. Every night for nine days a wolf came and ate one of them until only Sigmund was left. On the tenth night, Signy covered Sigmund's face with honey. The wolf came and started licking the honey off; Sigmund grabbed the wolf's tongue with his teeth, ripping it out and killing the beast.

Sigmund took up residence in the woods. Signy sent him her two sons to see whether they could help him, but they proved cowardly, so she told Sigmund to kill them. One day she changed bodies with a sorceress, went out to see her brother, and slept with him for three nights. After nine months, she gave birth to Sigmund's son, Sinfjotli. When he grew up, she sent him to Sigmund (who thought he was Siggeir's son), and Sinfjotli proved brave and tough as could be. Sigmund thought he'd spend a while toughening the boy before they went to seek revenge. They found magical wolf skins that let them transform themselves into wolves and spent some time rampaging around the woods as wild beasts, which proved to be a good training program for a young warrior.

Sigmund and Signy's revenge

Sigmund finally decided that Sinfjotli was ready to help him avenge his father Volsung's death (see the preceding section). They went to the castle and attacked the king, where they were captured. The king had them buried underground, but Signy managed to throw in Sigmund's sword before they were sealed up. They used the sword to saw their way through the rocks holding them underground, climbed up into the hall where all the king's men were sleeping, and set the place on fire.

Signy now told Sigmund that Sinfjotli was his son. Now that she had vengeance, she decided to die with her husband, Siggeir, and walked into the fire.

Some father-son exploits

Sigmund and Sinfjotli went home and had various adventures. Sigmund married a woman named Borghild. Sinfjotli and Borghild's brother got into a fight over a woman, and Sinfjotli killed the other man. Borghild poisoned Sinfjotli in revenge, and Sigmund drove Borghild away from the court; she died soon thereafter.

The story of Borghild's poisoning Sinfjotli is very similar to the Greek tale of Medea trying to poison the hero Theseus at his father's court. Chapter 6 has that story.

Sigmund then married a second time. His new wife was Hjordis, the daughter of a powerful king named Eylimi, and the fairest and wisest of all women. Another man wanted to marry her, and her father knew that the choice would bring trouble whomever he chose. So he let Hjordis choose. She picked Sigmund, even though he was very old by now.

Shortly after Sigmund and Hjordis married, his rival for her affections went to war against him. Sigmund was mortally wounded (after a battlefield visit by Odin; see Chapter 12 for more on Odin's interest in fallen warriors), and his famous sword broke. After the battle, Hjordis found him dying on the field. He told her that she'd bear a son who'd be the foremost of the Volsung line. He asked her to save the pieces of his sword, which would be made into a new sword named Gram; his son would use that sword. Then he died.

The great Dane Sigurd (the guy, not the dog)

After Sigmund died in battle (see the preceding section), the king of the Danes came to the battlefield, saw Hjordis, and heard her story. He took her home with

him and married her. She had her baby boy and named him Sigurd. He was the biggest and strongest boy around, and everyone loved him.

A man named Regin was largely responsible for Sigurd's education, teaching him several languages, sports, chess, and *runes* (Germanic and Norse letters that people used for carving inscriptions on wood or stone). He and Odin helped Sigurd choose a horse, a descendant of Odin's horse Sleipnir; it was called Grani. Then Regin told Sigurd that he needed more wealth and that he could get it from the hoard of the dragon Fafnir. (Fafnir happened to be Regin's brother, but Regin was ready to kill him for his wealth.)

REMEMBER

Runes had both practical and magical uses. J. R. R. Tolkien made ample use of them in *The Lord of the Rings.*

Now for that big ol' dragon

Sigurd needed a good sword if he was going to kill a dragon (see the preceding section). He went to his mother, who gave him the pieces of his father's sword. Regin put them back together into a sword named Gram that could cut anything. After a detour to kill the king who had killed his father, Sigurd set out to find Fafnir.

Regin showed Sigurd where the dragon lived and told him to dig a ditch to hide in. Then Regin (who was no fool) ran off to hide. While Sigurd was digging, an old man — Odin in disguise — walked by and told him he was doing it wrong; he should dig several ditches for the dragon's poisonous blood to run into and then hide himself in another one to stab it. Then the man disappeared. Sigurd dug the ditches like the old man had suggested. (This practice of appearing briefly to make a suggestion and just as quickly disappearing was typical of Odin.)

Fafnir came crawling out to get a drink, shaking the earth as he went, and Sigurd hid in his ditch. When the dragon stepped over him, Sigurd plunged his sword up to the hilt into the dragon's chest. Fafnir thrashed and raged, destroying everything around him, and then he died.

A little bird told me

Regin congratulated Sigurd on his victory over Fafnir (see the preceding section) but moped a bit because his brother was dead and it was his fault. He asked Sigurd for a favor: Cut out the dragon's heart, roast it over the fire, and give it to him to eat. Sigurd agreed, but as he was cooking the heart, he touched it and put his finger in his mouth. As soon as the blood from Fafnir's heart touched his tongue, he could understand the speech of birds.

And what were the birds saying? That Regin was going to betray him and that he should kill Regin, take the dragon's treasure for himself, and then go see a beautiful woman named Brynhild. Regin was feeling guilty about having his brother killed and thought he could blame Sigurd for it; then he could have the dragon's treasure all to himself. (The saga doesn't explain how the birds knew this, or how a man and a dragon could be brothers, for that matter.)

So Sigurd killed Regin with his sword. He ate some of the dragon's heart and saved the rest for later. Then he rode to the dragon's lair, where he found mounds of treasure. He loaded it onto his horse and rode off to see Brynhild.

Love's losers and the psychic hotline

After Sigurd killed Fafnir the dragon and took his treasure, he went to see Brynhild. She was a *Valkyrie,* a warrior maiden. Sigurd found her asleep in a tower, dressed in armor. He sliced it off her body, which woke her up, and introduced himself as one of the Volsungs. Brynhild told him that she had made a vow that she'd only marry someone who knew no fear.

Sigurd told Brynhild he wanted to marry her, and she said she would. They went their separate ways for a while: Sigurd to fight more battles and Brynhild to make a beautiful tapestry depicting his heroics. Sigurd then went to her house, and they renewed their commitment to one another. Unfortunately, in addition to her warrior skills, Brynhild could also foretell the future, and her psychic senses were tingling. She warned Sigurd that they wouldn't have a happy ending.

Trapped by the ale of forgetfulness

Brynhild predicted that Sigurd would marry a woman named Gudrun rather than her. Then, Gudrun happened to arrive on the scene. She was the daughter of a king and had come to ask her friend Brynhild's advice about a dream. Brynhild told Gudrun about Sigurd and then predicted her future: Sigurd was going to visit Gudrun; her mother, Grimhild, would give him a potion that would make him forget everything; he'd marry Gudrun but die shortly after; and then she'd marry King Atli, whom she'd kill at the end. Gudrun was daunted by this prediction and rode back home.

And it all came to pass just as Brynhild had said. Sigurd came calling at Gudrun's house, and Gudrun's mother thought he'd make a nice husband for her daughter. She mixed up a special ale of forgetfulness. Sigurd drank it and immediately forgot Brynhild. He married Gudrun and swore allegiance to her family.

Courtship by fire

Gudrun's brother Gunnar needed a wife, and Sigurd offered to help him find one. They decided he should marry Brynhild (whom Sigurd had previously promised to marry; see the preceding section). Brynhild had ensconced herself in a tower surrounded by a ring of fire; she had set this arrangement up as a test, declaring that she'd only marry a man who'd ride through the flames to her.

Gunnar couldn't persuade his horse to gallop through the fire, so he and Sigurd exchanged bodies and Sigurd galloped through the flames on Grani, the magical horse he had found with Odin's help (as we explain earlier in the chapter). He introduced himself as Gunnar, spent three nights with Brynhild, and then went back home with his brother-in-law.

Brynhild went to her father, told him that a man had ridden through the ring of fire, and said that she'd marry him because obviously he knew no fear. Then she went to Gunnar's castle and married him.

One day when Brynhild and Gudrun were bathing in the river, they got into a fight, and Gudrun revealed that Sigurd, not Gunnar, had been the one to ride through the ring of fire. Brynhild got all bent out of shape and took to her bed. Everyone tried to cheer her up and get her to go on with her life, but she refused; she had been tricked into marrying an inferior man and didn't want to live anymore.

Brynhild asked Gunnar to kill Sigurd. Gunnar was torn but eventually sided with his wife and got his brother Guttorm to murder Sigurd. Guttorm stabbed him while he lay in bed with Gudrun; Sigurd managed to kill his assassin before he bled to death. Desperately unhappy, Brynhild stabbed herself. Before she died, she asked Gunnar to burn her and Sigurd on a pyre together, which he did.

The last of the Volsungs

Following the death of her husband Sigurd (see the preceding section), Gudrun left home and moved into the Danish royal court for seven years. Her mother, Grimhild, finally contacted her and told her she needed to marry again and get compensation for the loss of her husband. She gave Gudrun a drink that made her forget her troubles. Then she announced that Gudrun would marry Atli. (Atli was Attila the Hun.)

Gudrun and Attila the Hun

Gudrun said she didn't want to marry Atli because he'd be cruel to her brothers, but her mother insisted. The wedding took place, but it wasn't a fond union. Atli spent his time plotting to get Sigurd's gold, which was now in the hands of his wife's brothers, Gunnar and Hogni.

He invited them to come visit; Gudrun tried to warn them not to come, but they showed up anyway. Atli ambushed them. He cut out Hogni's heart and showed it to Gunnar. Atli then put Gunnar in a pit full of snakes. Gudrun sent Gunnar a harp; his hands were tied, but he played it with his toes until a snake bit him and he died.

Atli tried to reconcile with Gudrun, but she was pretty upset about her brothers' deaths. She got her revenge, though. She killed the sons she had had with Atli (with their consent; they told her that she could do what she liked with them) and served her husband their blood and hearts. After she told him what he had had for dinner, their relationship was even more strained. (The Greek stories about the House of Atreus seem pretty similar. See Chapter 8.) She finished things off by stabbing Atli in his bed one night, but she did give him a nice funeral. Then she set his hall on fire, and all his soldiers killed one another in their frenzy to escape.

The end of Gudrun's line

Despite her rather dramatic split with her second husband Atli, Gudrun married another husband and had several sons with him. Her busy life seems to have slowed down a bit now, and she found time to arrange a marriage for the daughter she had with Sigurd, a beautiful woman named Svanhild. Svanhild's prospective husband's son insinuated to his father that Svanhild had already slept with him, and the king ordered her trampled to death by horses.

When Gudrun heard of her daughter's violent death, she urged her three sons to avenge her; she charmed their armor so it couldn't be harmed by iron. Two of the brothers killed their third brother on the way there, though they soon decided that it had been a mistake. Those two found the evil king and cut off his hands and feet. Then the king's men found them and attacked them, but they were impervious to iron. A one-eyed man (Odin, of course) walked in and suggested that the king's soldiers use stones against the brothers, and that was the end of Gudrun's last children. It was also the end of the story — the *Saga of the Volsungs* definitely ends on a down note.

Something for Everyone: Beowulf

Beowulf is the earliest book-length poem in any Germanic language. Only one copy of the *Beowulf* manuscript survives. People started taking notice of it in the late 1700s CE, when all of Europe was trying to come up with stories that explained the existence of their nations — an *Iliad* for every nation. (Head to Chapter 7 for the story on the *Iliad* and Chapter 10 for a discussion of national foundation myths.) The Germans claimed the *Niebelungenlied* (the *Song of the Niebelungs*), the

French took the *Chanson de Roland* (the *Song of Roland*), and the English claimed *Beowulf*. So did the Danes and the Germans. The Danes claimed it for its setting in Denmark, the Germans claimed it because it was in the pre-Christian North, and the English claimed it because it was written in English — Old English.

TECHNICAL STUFF

Old English isn't readable for a modern English speaker unless they've studied the language. It's not the same language that Chaucer used in the *Canterbury Tales*, which is Middle English and fairly easy for modern folks to read after a little getting used to. Old English is also called Anglo-Saxon, and it's much more like German than modern English. The English spoken today has a lot of French mixed in with it from the years that the Normans spent living in England after William the Conqueror's conquest in 1066 CE.

REMEMBER

The poet who wrote down the story seems to have been a Christian (very likely a monk, because they had the tools to write such documents) looking back at a pagan age. The poem has tidbits of what seem to be pagan beliefs sprinkled throughout, such as Beowulf's belief in fate and his desire for praise and glory during his life, not after death. The evil Grendel is connected with Cain (the son of Adam and Eve in the Bible; he famously killed his own brother Abel) but also with the evil Norse giants we cover in Chapter 12.

Anyway, *Beowulf* is the story of a guy named Beowulf, a Geat who is brave and good at killing monsters. The *Geats* lived somewhere in southern Sweden.

Grendel and the Heorot drive-thru

A king in Denmark named Hrothgar was immensely successful in battle. He built a huge hall named Heorot, and all his young soldiers stayed there with him when they weren't battling.

One day a monster arrived — Grendel. Grendel lived in the marshes and lurked outside the halls of humans, hating the sound of their merrymaking inside. He was a descendant of Cain and the giants, condemned by the Creator, along with all other trolls, elves, and the living dead who strove against God.

When night fell, Grendel took a look inside this hall. He saw all the warriors lying on the floor asleep after their feast, grabbed 30 of them, and took them home to eat. At dawn, the other warriors woke up and noticed that a bunch of their number were missing. They all mourned, Hrothgar most of all, for their lost companions.

Grendel turned up the next night and took another bunch of warriors for dinner. After that no one wanted to sleep in Heorot, and it stood empty for 12 years. The Danes didn't know what to do; even praying to their pagan gods didn't help.

Beowulf meets party-crasher Grendel

Beowulf the Geat had heard of Grendel's misdeeds (see the preceding section) and came sailing over from Sweden to help out. Beowulf was a great hero with ambitions to be even greater, and heroes always need to do dangerous, flashy, crowd-pleasing feats to advance their careers.

Hrothgar's guard met Beowulf and his men at the port. After Beowulf had introduced himself and stated his purpose, the guard led the Geats to Hrothgar. Beowulf told the king that he and his men wanted to cleanse Heorot of its monster and that because Grendel didn't use weapons or armor, he wouldn't either. Beowulf told the king where to send his armor if he died and said that he accepted whatever his fate would be.

That evening everyone had a party in Heorot, with golden ale and a poet singing the stories of heroes, including the *Volsungsaga* we discuss in the earlier section "Binge-worthy Programming: The Saga of the Volsungs." Beowulf used the opportunity to brag about past heroics on his resumé, such as the time he spent five days swimming in the ocean killing sea monsters. Hrothgar's beautiful queen went around the hall greeting everyone, and Beowulf pledged to her that he'd kill Grendel or die trying. Then everyone went to bed, all the Danes departing for their own homes while Beowulf and his team bedded down in Heorot.

In the darkness Grendel crept in. He saw the warriors sleeping and laughed to himself, planning to eat them all. He grabbed one and immediately gobbled him up. He reached for another and found his own arm being grabbed. Beowulf had his arm and wouldn't let go!

Grendel screamed and writhed, but he couldn't get away from Beowulf. Finally his arm tore away from his shoulder. He ran out the door and escaped into the marsh, where he soon died.

If (Grendel's) Mamma ain't Happy, Nobody's happy

The seemingly effortless downfall of Grendel in the preceding section made everyone really happy, and Hrothgar gave Beowulf a bunch of presents. They had another big party with Grendel's arm as a decoration. But that night, after everyone had gone to sleep, another monster showed up: Grendel's mother. She wasn't as big or as strong as her son, but she was still scary and ultimately proved to be at least as tough as Grendel. She grabbed up Hrothgar's favorite warrior and ran back to the marsh with him, where he presumably met a very unhappy end.

So Beowulf had to do more heroics. He put on his armor, picked up his weapons, and walked out to the lake, where Grendel's mother apparently lived underwater. Beowulf jumped into the water, descended for a whole day, and found the monster deep below the waves. (Evidently, he could hold his breath for a really long time.)

Beowulf swung at Grendel's mother with his sword but couldn't hurt her. So he grabbed her with his hands and flung her to the seafloor. She fought back and tried to stab him with a knife, but his armor protected him. Then Beowulf grabbed an ancient giant sword, part of the collection of armor and weapons she kept in her underwater cave (souvenirs of warriors she had killed in the past), and struck her in the neck with it. That killed her.

Now Beowulf had a chance to look around her house, and who should he see lying on a couch but Grendel, cold and dead. He used the sword to chop off Grendel's head and swam back to the surface.

After more parties, poems, and presents, Beowulf and his team of warriors left Hrothgar's court in Denmark went back to their home, Geatland (in Sweden). Beowulf became king.

A dragonslayer's last stand

After his monster-killing exploits in Denmark (see the preceding sections), Beowulf reigned peacefully as king of the Geats for 50 years. Then one day a dragon came to town.

This dragon had lived peacefully in a cave in the hills until a thief had come and stolen a cup from its collection of treasure. The dragon left its cave to find the thief; when it returned, it discovered that his treasure had been looted again. So it went to war against the Geats, burning their homes and fields with its fiery breath.

Beowulf was an old man now, but he rose to the occasion. He took up arms and went out to the dragon's lair. The dragon breathed fire at Beowulf, and Beowulf stabbed it with his sword. His shield stopped some of the fire, but his sword only enraged the dragon — not the deathblow he had hoped for. Beowulf was in trouble.

Now a young soldier named Wiglaf announced to his companions that it wasn't proper to let his lord die alone and ran out to help him. Beowulf struck at the dragon again, but his sword broke and the dragon grabbed him by the neck. Wiglaf plunged his sword into the dragon's chest, and Beowulf revived enough to stick his dagger into its belly. Together, they killed it.

Wiglaf bathed Beowulf's wounds, but Beowulf knew he was dying. He said a little speech about how sorry he was not to have a son to inherit his dragon-slaying gear but that he didn't regret how he had lived his life. He gave Wiglaf his gold necklace and armor, and then his soul floated away to meet its judgment.

The soldiers all went together to take care of Beowulf's body, but first they came upon the dragon, 50 feet of fire-breathing flying snake lying dead amidst his treasures. Wiglaf had the men build a pyre and cover it with gold and armor, and they burned Beowulf's body, singing a sorrowful song. They buried his ashes in a *barrow* (a cave-like tomb) with more treasure, and that was the end of Beowulf the Geat.

IN THIS CHAPTER

- Tracing the sources of Arthurian myth
- Meeting the Arthurian characters
- Unfolding Arthur's life story
- Searching for the Holy Grail and other knight-time adventures

Chapter 14

A Seat at the Round Table: King Arthur and His Court

No single, definitive version exists of the story of King Arthur, the legendary king of England, and his chivalrous Knights of the Round Table. The story has been so popular for so many centuries that almost every Western European country for the last 1,000 years has had a shot at the legend.

So this chapter doesn't have everything there is to know about Arthur. Instead, we've summarized some of the more famous stories (especially from Sir Thomas Malory, the author of *Le Morte d'Arthur,* whose work influenced most authors who came after him). This chapter introduces you to a few of the better-known characters, but we don't get them all. This chapter introduces you to King Arthur and his legend, give you a tour of his castle at Camelot, let you meet his Knights of the Round Table and the wizard Merlin, and the women of Camelot: Guinevere, the Lady of the Lake, and others. The legends surrounding Arthur are full of adventure, often full of violence, and ultimately very tragic.

REMEMBER

We don't claim to have gotten every detail "right," either; so many versions of the stories exist that no one can say which is "correct." Malory said one thing, Tennyson said another, and Monty Python still another, and they're all allowed to do this; it's a myth, and you can tell it as you like.

King Arthur: The Man, the Myth, the Legend

The historical Arthur probably lived in the fifth, sixth, or seventh century, at a time when the Romans sort of stopped paying attention to Britain. (Rome was falling, so they were a little preoccupied.) During that time Welsh and English kingdoms began to replace Roman government, but they were still figuring things out. Various tribes fought one another, and a group called the Saxons invaded much of Britain.

Arthur may have been a leader of the *Britons,* the native British people who tried to get rid of the Saxon threat. He may have been a Welsh hero. Some people suggest he was a descendant of the occupying Romans. A popular explanation is that he was a British cavalry general named Arturius who fought the Saxons and defeated them in the battle of Badon Hill in 517.

Back in the 12th century, people found a cross in Glastonbury Abbey with a Latin caption on it reading "Here lies buried the famous King Arthur, in the Island of Avalon." See it in Figure 14-1. The cross was last seen in the 18th century, but drawings of it survive today. Was this Arthur's actual tomb or a publicity stunt by the monks of Glastonbury Abbey? No one knows.

Everybody loves Arthur: Medieval sources

Geoffrey of Monmouth's *History of the Kings of Britain,* written around 1135, gave Arthur his place in medieval history — it was kind of an official biography. A literary history with a romantic flavor, much of it was adopted from Welsh history and legend; Geoffrey seems to have written it to give the Welsh and Britons a bit of national pride. Julius Caesar and Brutus make appearances in the tale, but Arthur and his sidekick, Merlin, get most of the coverage.

The French fell in love with Arthur and composed their own stories about him. The poet Chrétien de Troyes wrote the most famous of the French poems. He lived in the French court in the 12th century and wrote his most famous works between 1170 and 1190: *Lancelot (The Knight of the Cart)*, *Yvain (The Knight with the Lion)*, and

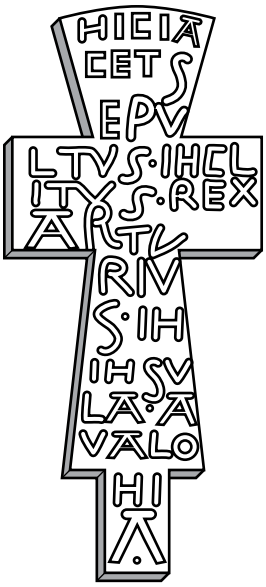

FIGURE 14-1: Arthur's Cross from Glastonbury Abbey.

Perceval (The History of the Grail). The Germans had a shot at Arthur, too. Hartmann von Aue's version of *Iwein* (*Yvain)* and Wolfram von Eschenbach's *Parzival,* both written around 1200, take their plots from the French versions.

REMEMBER

The most famous version of the Arthurian legend is the one in Sir Thomas Malory's *Le Morte d'Arthur,* written around 1470 while Malory was in prison (he'd committed a number of crimes, including highway robbery, cattle theft, and attempted murder). Malory appears to have used most of the sources available to him, including Monmouth's history and the French romances.

TECHNICAL STUFF

Arthur himself doesn't play much of a role in the majority of medieval "Arthurian" literature. Writers preferred to focus on his court and the exploits of his knights. Arthur appears at the beginning and end of a lot of the stories as a rather remote and majestic figure who can't be bothered with mundane adventures.

His star power continues!

The Arthurian legend has been consistently popular for the last ten centuries or so, embodying different ideals at different times. Although the earliest stories described civilization emerging from chaos, the medieval people saw Camelot as a kind of chivalrous utopia. Victorian poets used the story to express Victorian ideals, and modern authors tend to portray it as a battleground in which noble ideals can rise above misery.

Arthur had a big resurgence in popularity in 19th century England. The English poet Tennyson wrote a long poetic version of the King Arthur story called *Idylls of the King.* Tennyson based his story on Malory's *Le Morte d'Arthur* but put his own Victorian spin on the tale. He emphasized Arthur's goodness, his insistence on harmony, chastity, peace, and selflessness — all favorite Victorian virtues.

The 20th century produced a huge amount of Arthurian stuff: books (fiction and nonfiction), plays, movies, and historical tours of England. Don't expect it to stop anytime soon.

Who's Who in Camelot

The Arthurian legends have an enormous cast of characters, far too many to list here. Kings, sorceresses and wizards, beautiful ladies, lots of knights, and the occasional *hermit* (a person who retreats from society to live a life of solitary prayer, and often becomes weird in the process) — these stories have something for everyone.

One thing that makes the story more confusing is some characters' inconvenient habit of going by different names in different sources. Lancelot sometimes appears as Launcelot; Mordred occasionally goes by Modred; the Lady of the Lake seems to have a bunch of different names; and at least two different princesses who fall in love with Lancelot are named Elaine.

TIP

Don't let the inconsistencies throw you; just read the stories and don't worry about getting them to match.

Macho men of yore

You can't have medieval heroics without men, and the Arthurian stories had a bunch of them — good, bad, and in between. Here are the most influential players:

- **Arthur:** Arthur is a great king of England. In the stories, Arthur unifies all of Britain and brings an age of prosperity to the kingdom. His Round Table at his court at Camelot provides a place for all rival knights to sit on equal footing, none higher or lower than another. Arthur himself is a great and heroic warrior, but he's also a little of everything else: generous, indecisive, forgiving, unfair, wise, and stupid.
- **Merlin:** Merlin is a magician. He helps Uther Pendragon (Arthur's father) seduce Igraine (Arthur's mother) and beget Arthur. He gives baby Arthur to a

trustworthy knight, Sir Ector, to raise far from the dangers of court. (See "A Medieval Daytime Drama: Arthur's Beginning" later in the chapter for more.) In some versions, Merlin tutors the young Arthur and arranges for the sword-in-the-stone contest that proves Arthur's kingship. He also gets the Lady of the Lake, the sorceress Nyneve, to give the sword Excalibur to Arthur. Toward the end of Arthur's life, Merlin falls in love with Nyneve, who persuades him to teach her all his magic and then imprisons him in an enchanted cave or glass tower. So much for the loyalty of former students!

The knights of Arthur's court love to go out on quests for honor and adventure, such as the search for the Holy Grail. Some knights are closer to Arthur than others for various reasons. Here are the most important and influential knights in Arthurian stories:

- **Lancelot of the Lake:** So-called because his foster mother raises him under the water of a lake. He's a late addition to the King Arthur legend, appearing for the first time in the works of Chrétien de Troyes. He's Arthur's best and favorite knight and is loyal to the king in all ways but one: He and Arthur's wife, Queen Guinevere, carry on an illicit relationship for years.
- **Galahad:** He's Lancelot's illegitimate son with Elaine (a princess). He's sinless and invincible, the only knight worthy to sit in the Siege Perilous and the only one to find the Holy Grail. (The *Siege Perilous* is a seat at the Round Table reserved for an appointed knight. Before Galahad arrives at Camelot, no one knows who this knight will be, but no one ever sits there because if the wrong person sits in the Siege Perilous, he'll die.)
- **Gawain:** This guy is Arthur's nephew, son of his half-sister Margawse. Before Lancelot enters the myths, Gawain is one of the most valiant and honorable of the knights. Later he becomes less exalted and morally upright, and in some accounts he actually leads Lancelot in an attack against Arthur. Gawain is under an enchantment that makes him get stronger as the morning goes on until he peaks at noon, and then his strength declines in the afternoon. He is the star of the story *Gawain and the Green Knight*, told in the later section "Sir Gawain and the jolly Green Knight."
- **Mordred:** He's Arthur's illegitimate son with Arthur's aunt Margawse (she seduced him; he didn't realize who she was). He's a major troublemaker in Arthur's court; he exposes Lancelot's and Guinevere's adultery (everyone has known about it for years and tactfully avoided saying anything), which forces Arthur to take action. Then he tries to marry Guinevere when Arthur's in France. In the last battle, he fatally wounds Arthur, who then kills him.
- **Uther Pendragon:** He is Arthur's father and king of all of England. He has Merlin transform him into the shape of the Duke of Cornwall so he can sleep with the duke's wife, Igraine. He then gives Merlin the child of that union: Arthur.

Independent women

The men have a lot of knightly stuff to do (see the preceding section), but you can't have chivalry without ladies to love and fight for. Arthurian stories have their fair share of women, all of whom have minds of their own:

- **Guinevere:** She's Arthur's wife. She's desperately in love with Lancelot, and many of the stories describe her romance with him — meeting him in castle towers where she was imprisoned, berating him for his dalliances with other women, longing for his return from adventures. Her relations with Lancelot range from pristine courtly love in the poems of Chrétien de Troyes to no-holds-barred adultery in Malory's book. (*Courtly love* was a type of medieval extramarital affair among nobles in which the man wooed the lady with gifts, songs, and other tributes and she occasionally glanced at him.) She has no children.
- **Morgan le Fay:** She's the daughter of Igraine and the Duke of Cornwall, which makes her Arthur's older half-sister. She's a sorceress; Merlin taught her magic. In some stories she helps Arthur, and in others she plots against him.
- **Elaine:** This young lady is a beautiful princess who seduces Lancelot and becomes the mother of Galahad. Guinevere hates her.
- **Igraine:** She's Arthur's mother. As we note in the preceding section, Igraine welcomes Uther Pendragon (disguised as her husband) into her bed, where they conceive Arthur; the Duke of Cornwall is killed that night. Igraine then marries Uther and gives birth to Arthur.
- **The Lady of the Lake:** She's Lancelot's foster mother. She seems to be the same person as the character called Vivien, Nimue, or Nyneve in various sources. She presents the magical sword Excalibur to Arthur and takes it back from him as he's dying. She also imprisons Merlin in a glass tower (or cave), as we explain in the preceding section.

A Medieval Daytime Drama: Arthur's Beginning

Arthur had to come from somewhere; the story of his birth and youth is exciting and well known. It all starts with a king's lust for a Duke's wife, a mysterious sword in a stone, how Arthur became king and got a magical sword, and the birth of Arthur's illegitimate son.

Uther and Igraine

Uther Pendragon is king of all England. The Duke of Cornwall has fought against him for many years. Uther invites the duke to come for a visit to talk things over, and the duke brings along his wife, Igraine. The negotiations go pretty well, but Uther falls in love with Igraine and tries to seduce her. She tells her husband about it, and the pair leaves at once.

When the king discovers that they've slipped away, he flies into a rage and launches an attack against the duke. The battle rages, and many people die.

But Uther can't stop thinking about Igraine. One of his knights, Sir Ulfius, goes to the wizard Merlin to ask for help. Merlin comes up with a plan: He'll make Uther look like the Duke of Cornwall so he can visit Igraine in the night. She'll have a son from this union, and Merlin demands that they give him this baby as soon as he's born.

That very night Merlin disguises Uther as the Duke of Cornwall. Igraine thinks he's her husband and welcomes him to her bed. He leaves early in the morning. As it happens, the duke dies that same night, three hours before Uther visits Igraine.

With the duke dead, all the other nobles reconcile with Uther. He marries Igraine to seal the pact, and in due time, she gives birth to a son. Merlin takes him away, christens him Arthur, and brings him to a knight named Sir Ector to raise. Two (or 15) years later Uther dies, having first declared little Arthur to be his heir.

That weird sword stuck in the stone

Arthur grows up thinking he's Sir Ector's own son and that Sir Ector's son Kay is his older brother.

When Arthur's a teenager, something weird happens. A sword stuck in an anvil appears in the greatest church in London; the words on it say, "Whoso pulleth out the sword of this stone and anvil is rightwise king born of all England." Plenty of men try to pull the sword out, but no one can. So they decide to hold a tournament to decide who should win it.

TIP

A *tournament* in medieval terms was a contest of knightly skill. The knights were divided into two teams and fought with swords, axes, or whatever weapons they liked. It also had *jousting,* in which two knights galloped at each other with long spears and tried to knock each other off their horses.

Sir Ector and his son Sir Kay are going to participate in this tournament, and Arthur comes along as Kay's assistant. When they get to the jousting site, Kay realizes he's forgotten his sword at home and sends Arthur back to get it. But no one's home and Arthur can't get in to get the sword, so he thinks he'll go to the church and get the sword he's seen sticking out of a stone — he has no clue what it is.

Arthur gallops to the church, runs up to the stone, pulls the sword out easily, and dashes back to his brother. Kay immediately recognizes it. He brings it to his dad and says, "Shouldn't I be king because I have this sword?" Sir Ector's no fool; he asks Kay outright how he got the sword, and Kay says Arthur gave it to him. So Ector asks Arthur how *he* got it, and Arthur says he just pulled it right out of the stone.

Ector had known his adopted son was unusual, but he hadn't realized just how unusual; now he kneels down and hails Arthur as king. All the other knights come to the church, and everyone takes another try at pulling the sword out of the stone; Arthur's the only one who can do it. Ector now makes Arthur promise that his foster brother Kay will always be his *seneschal,* or steward, which Arthur is glad to do.

The beginning of Arthur's reign

The sword from the stone (see the preceding section) opens a big door for Arthur. He and Ector go to the archbishop and tell him the story, and Arthur is crowned (after some squabbling and disagreement among knights who don't want a boy king).

Young Arthur goes to work stabilizing the kingdom from the chaos that followed Uther's death. He soon incorporates Scotland and Wales. He uses the Round Table to give a place to all important nobles — at a round table, they're all equal and none can claim to sit above another.

Fetching Excalibur, another magical sword

Merlin and Arthur go riding one day and come upon a lake. In its center is an arm grasping a jeweled sword and *scabbard* (sheath). Merlin tells Arthur that this sword is Excalibur and that the Lady of the Lake wants to give it to him. Arthur rows out to get it.

Loving the wrong women

While Arthur's just getting the court going, his mother's sister Margawse comes to visit. Arthur and Margawse end up going to bed together (either they both

lusted for each other or Margawse seduced her unwitting nephew) and conceiving Mordred. Merlin later tells Arthur that Mordred will cause the downfall of Arthur's court. Hoping to avert this prophecy, Arthur issues a decree that all noble babies born around May Day (May 1) be brought to court. He puts them all on a boat and sets it adrift. It eventually sinks, but one baby survives. Spoiler alert: That's Mordred. A man finds and raises him.

After making the mistake of fathering a child with his aunt, Arthur takes another stab at love. He tells Merlin that he wants to marry Guinevere, daughter of his ally King Leodegan. Merlin warns Arthur that Guinevere is destined to love another man, but Merlin goes and asks her father whether Arthur can marry her anyway. Leodegan is delighted with the match, and Guinevere marries Arthur. But as Merlin predicted, she never loves anyone but Lancelot.

Sex, Lies, and Aimless Wandering

After Arthur got his court started, he and his knights had to come up with appropriate knightly activities. Though the Knights of the Round Table spent their time looking for adventure, the plotlines of the legend actually hinge more on sex than heroics.

The queen and her lover

Guinevere loves only Lancelot, and Lancelot loves only Guinevere. All the ladies fall for Lancelot (including Elaine, the fair maid of Astolat, in the following section). Though he spurns them all, Guinevere is forever getting extremely jealous. Lancelot isn't immune to a romantic ruse or two, though. His most famous slip-up is with the other Elaine, the mother of Galahad, which we cover in the later section "Lancelot and his accidental mistress."

The nature of Guinevere's relationship with Arthur is hard to say. Arthur does know before he marries Guinevere that she'll fall in love with Lancelot; Merlin warns him. She and Lancelot try to keep their relationship secret, or at least discreet, but everyone at court knows about them. Generally, though, everyone courteously turns a blind eye to their affair; the king has evidently chosen not to criticize them, and most of the court lets it go.

After Arthur's death, Lancelot and Guinevere both repent their years of adultery and join religious orders.

Lancelot and Elaine of Astolat

King Arthur announces that he'll hold a huge tournament in Camelot. Guinevere stays behind in London, claiming she's ill. Lancelot happens to be staying, too, and everyone assumes the two of them want to be together. But the queen decides that's just too suspicious, so she sends Lancelot off to the tournament.

He rides away and, to further dispel suspicion, decides to fight against King Arthur. He fights for Elaine of Astolat's father and carries her token into battle. He's badly wounded and stays with Elaine for a while, getting nursed back to health.

When he's healed, Elaine tells him she's in love with him and asks him to marry her. When he refuses, she offers to be his mistress. When he says no to that, too, she claims to have no more joy in life. She wastes away and dies, and her father sends her body down the river to Camelot on a barge, with a note stating that she was a virgin and asking Lancelot to bury her. Guinevere starts to get angry, but Lancelot tells her to back off. "The Lady of Shalott" is Tennyson's poem about the story.

Lancelot and his accidental mistress

One day a hermit comes to court and announces that the man who can sit in the *Siege Perilous* (a special, vacant seat at the Round Table that we describe in the earlier section "Macho men of yore") will be born that year and that he'll also find the *Holy Grail* (a vessel thought to have healing powers).

A king's little scheme: Seduced in the night

Right after the hermit's visit, Lancelot goes off adventuring, as one does in an Arthurian legend. He comes to a town where the people beg him to save a lady who's perpetually scalded by hot water, the result of a curse by the sorceress Morgan le Fay. (The victim is also beautiful and completely naked.) Lancelot rescues her and meets the king of the land, King Pelles.

Pelles wants Lancelot to get his daughter Elaine pregnant. Pelles is a descendant of Joseph of Arimathea (the man who had created the Grail), and he knows that his daughter's son would be Sir Galahad, the purest knight ever and the one who can win the Holy Grail. He also knows Lancelot loves only Guinevere, so he enlists the help of a sorceress, Lady Brusen, to help.

Lady Brusen sends a message to Lancelot that Guinevere is waiting for him in a nearby castle. Lancelot immediately goes to see her and spends a great night with her, only to be astonished the next morning when he discovers Elaine in bed with him instead. He pulls out his sword to kill her, but she jumps out of bed naked and

begs his forgiveness, telling him that she's going to have his son. She's young and beautiful, and before long Lancelot is kissing her again.

Around a year later, after Lancelot has come back home, Guinevere and the rest of the court hear the news about the birth of Elaine's baby, Galahad; everyone knows he's Lancelot's son, and Guinevere is furious. But Lancelot explains that he'd been enchanted and thought he was making love to her, his own true love Guinevere, and she forgives him.

Fool me twice, I lose my mind

After Lancelot explains himself and makes peace with Guinevere over the Galahad situation (see the preceding section), Elaine comes to visit. All the men at court admire her beauty (except for Lancelot, who's mortified to see her), and Guinevere pretends to welcome her. Elaine is heartbroken because Lancelot won't talk to her, so her sorceress friend Lady Brusen promises to arrange for Lancelot to come to her bed. Lancelot has promised Guinevere he'll go to her that night, but Lady Brusen gets to him first! After Lancelot goes to bed in his own room, Lady Brusen comes and tells him that Guinevere is waiting for him. He falls for it again, and Lady Brusen leads him to Elaine (castles were very dark at night).

Guinevere has her own maid go get Lancelot, but the girl comes back and reports that he's gone. Guinevere is furious and lies sleepless. After some time, Lancelot awakens and realizes what's happened. He runs into the hall, where the queen finds him and gives him a piece of her mind. Overcome with the shock of it all, he faints.

When he awakes, he's insane. He jumps out the window in his nightshirt and spends two years running around the woods out of his mind. Guinevere and Elaine have words, and the queen kicks Elaine out of the castle.

Guinevere spends tons of money sending knights out to find Lancelot. Finally, some of the Knights of the Round Table find him and bring him back to Arthur. Arthur forgives him for his absence and comments that he figured the madness was due to Lancelot's passion for Elaine. Lancelot doesn't say anything, but everyone else knows who'd driven him insane.

Don't Quit Your Day Job: Knightly Heroics

The Knights of the Round Table have many adventures — it's one of their reasons for existence, after all. The Arthurian world is populated with strange knights and sorceresses who always keep things lively. And then you have the quest for the

Holy Grail, a pursuit that seems to have a Christian purpose but is filled with magical adventures.

Sir Gawain and the jolly Green Knight

The tale of Gawain and the Green Knight is one of the older Arthurian tales. It was written in the late 1300s by an unknown author. This story is about Arthur's nephew Sir Gawain, an honorable and valiant knight.

A chop for a chop

The story begins with King Arthur and all his knights at Camelot for the Christmas holidays. Their tradition is that no one can eat on New Year's Day until some adventure has happened, so all the guys are sitting around waiting. They don't have to wait long; a giant green knight walks into the court and proposes a bargain: He'll let any knight cut off his head, but that knight has to promise to return the favor and let the Green Knight cut his (the knight's) head off in a year.

Gawain accepts the challenge and cuts the knight's head right off. Then, to everyone's amazement, the Green Knight picks his head up, reminds Gawain to meet him at the Green Chapel in a year, and strolls out.

The quest to fulfill the bargain

The next year at Halloween, Gawain sets out; he has no idea where the Green Chapel is, so he leaves early to give himself lots of time. At Christmas, he finds himself in a dreary forest. He kneels and prays, and a castle appears before his eyes. The lord there gives him a bed for the night, tells him that the Green Chapel is just down the road, and says he'll take Gawain there for New Year's Day, which was in just three days.

In the meantime, he proposes an odd challenge: For the next three days, he'll go hunting and Gawain will stay in the castle with the lord's wife. At the end of the day, they'll exchange their spoils.

Kiss and tell

Every day the lord goes off hunting, and at the same time his wife comes to visit Gawain in his bed. He puts her off, but she manages to get some kisses in. On the first evening, the lord gives Gawain several deer and Gawain gives him a kiss. On the second night, the lord gives Gawain a boar and Gawain gives him two kisses. On the third night, the lord gives Gawain a fox skin and Gawain gives him three kisses. But Gawain breaks his pact, because that day the lady had given him a

magic green belt that will protect him from harm, and Gawain, thinking ahead to his previously scheduled beheading extravaganza, keeps this magic green belt a secret.

On New Year's Day, one of the lord's servants takes Gawain to the Green Chapel, where the Green Knight is sharpening his axe. Gawain bends to receive the blow. The Green Knight swings twice without hitting him and then grazes his neck with the axe on his third blow.

The Green Knight now reveals that he was the lord of the castle and that he'd instructed his wife to try to seduce Gawain. The first two swings of the axe were payback for Gawain's kissing his wife, and the third was for cheating by keeping the magic belt to himself. Gawain is embarrassed and tries to give the belt back, but the Green Knight makes him wear it to remind him of his disgrace. And then he tells Gawain that the whole bizarre scenario was a scheme by Morgan le Fay to test the Knights of the Round Table and frighten Guinevere.

Gawain returns to Camelot and tells everyone his story. Arthur announces that from then on, all knights will wear a green *baldric* (a belt worn over a shoulder and across the chest) to commemorate Gawain's adventure.

Sir Galahad and the quest for the Holy Grail

A knight named Galahad, Lancelot's son, kicked off the Quest for the Holy Grail. Arthur and his knights have just sat down to the Pentecost feast — a Christian festival that comes shortly after Easter — when a young woman rides into the hall and asks for Sir Lancelot. Lancelot rides away with her to an abbey, where his son Galahad, all grown up, is waiting for him. Galahad wants his dad to make him a knight. Lancelot does so and then returns to Camelot.

Time to try out the Siege Perilous

After becoming a knight, Galahad arrives at court and sits in the Siege Perilous, the seat at the Round Table that was reserved for his sinless self, as we explain in the earlier section "Macho men of yore." Everyone marvels at his audacity, and some think that, since nothing bad seemed to have happened to Galahad after sitting in the chair, he must be the sinless knight who'll find the Holy Grail. They all catch the urge to go searching for it, especially after everyone sees a vision of the Grail hovering over the table at dinner.

The Holy Grail, also known as the *Sangreal,* was supposed to be a silver cup in which Joseph of Arimathea collected blood and sweat from Christ's wounds as he hung on the cross. Joseph of Arimathea then brought the cup and the lance that pierced Christ's side to Britain, where he founded the first British Christian

church. Elaine (Galahad's mother, whom we talk about in the earlier section "Lancelot and his accidental mistress") was one of Joseph of Arimathea's descendants.

So the knights get their armor and weapons together, and everyone sets off in different directions. No one has any idea where the Grail is.

Galahad heals all and finds the Holy Grail

REMEMBER

All the knights have various exciting adventures, but Galahad is the star of this show. Because he's without sin, he has no trouble defeating the knights who attack him occasionally.

He rescues the Maidens' Castle, where seven knights have been raping young ladies. He enters a tournament on the spur of the moment and wounds Gawain. He finds a king who's hundreds of years old and makes him young again before he dies. He cools down a well whose waters are boiling with lust just by touching them. (Galahad was chaste as well as sinless, or maybe being sinless presumes chastity.) All in all, he's a very busy do-gooder.

Galahad arrives at last at the castle of Carbonek, the home of the Grail and the end of his quest. There he fixes the spear that had pierced Christ's side. The spirit of Joseph of Arimathea performs mass with the Holy Grail, assisted by several angels and Christ himself. Galahad thanks God for granting his wish to see the Holy Grail and requests that he now be allowed to leave the world. He gets this wish, too. A group of angels take his soul up to heaven. A hand reaches down and pulls up the Holy Grail and the spear, which haven't been seen since.

The Last Days of King Arthur

One day in May, Mordred, the brother of Gawain and bastard son of Arthur, reveals Lancelot and Guinevere's affair to the king (even though everyone already sort of knew but didn't talk about it). To back up his point, he waits until Lancelot goes into the queen's chamber and bursts in on the lovers moments after Lancelot walks through the door. He doesn't catch the pair in any adulterous activities, but he claims his proof nevertheless.

The breakup of the Round Table

With the affair out in the open, Arthur has to react. Lancelot and Guinevere say their goodbyes, and Lancelot fights his way out of the castle. Somewhat against

Arthur's will, the queen is sentenced to be burned at the stake. Her captors lead her out to the fire in her underwear, customary attire for execution by burning. As everyone expects, Lancelot rides to her rescue and carries her off (and gives her a dress to wear), but not before killing a huge number of knights, including Gawain's unarmed brothers.

Lancelot and Guinevere set up shop at a castle called Joyous Gard along with many supporters. Arthur and Lancelot fight for a while, but eventually Lancelot brings Guinevere back to Arthur, who would probably have forgiven him if not for Gawain, who's angry about the deaths of his brothers. The king banishes Lancelot from England, and Lancelot goes to France.

Arthur takes his army over to France to fight Lancelot, leaving Mordred in charge back in England. Mordred thinks this is his chance to claim the throne. He forges messages announcing that Arthur's dead and then asks Guinevere to marry him. She flees and barricades herself inside a castle. Back in France, Gawain and Lancelot have been fighting, and Lancelot seems to be winning. But because he won't strike Gawain while he's down, the contest is still on. (Lancelot may have slept with his king's wife, but he's still a man of honor.)

King Arthur identifies his real enemy

Mordred keeps pestering Guinevere to marry him. Off in France, Arthur hears about what Mordred's been doing in his absence and finally realizes that Mordred was his enemy. After all, Mordred's the one who tactlessly announced the queen's affair with Lancelot in the first place. Oh yeah, and Merlin predicted this would happen (see the earlier section "Loving the wrong women"). Arthur decides to head back to England for revenge against his traitorous son.

Arthur and his army arrive in Dover, England, and Mordred meets them with his army. They fight a battle, which Arthur's army wins handily. Gawain dies after that battle; the wounds he'd received from Lancelot have opened again. As Gawain dies, he forgives Lancelot and regrets having instigated war against him.

Arthur continues to pursue Mordred and his forces, fighting several battles. Finally, he offers Mordred a treaty. They're supposed to sign it in front of their armies, but, suspecting treachery, each orders their soldiers to attack if they see a naked sword. As luck would have it, a snake bites one of the soldiers, and he draws his sword to kill it. The ensuing battle goes badly for Arthur's men. In the end, Arthur and Mordred meet each other on the field. Arthur thrusts his spear through Mordred's body, and Mordred chops Arthur's head open before crashing down dead.

King and sword depart forever

As Arthur lies dying, he asks Sir Bedivere, the only knight left near him, to throw Excalibur into the nearby lake. After two false starts, Bedivere throws the sword in and reports that he saw a hand reach up from the water, wave the sword three times, and disappear beneath the surface.

Now Bedivere carries Arthur to the water's edge, and they find a barge carrying a queen, Arthur's sister Morgan le Fay, and her ladies. They load Arthur onto the barge and sail away and out of sight. The next day, Bedivere finds a fresh tomb with a hermit kneeling by it; the hermit says that the previous night a group of ladies had brought a body and buried it. And that was the tomb of King Arthur.

But not everyone believed Arthur was dead. There have always been some people in England who think that he will return one day and bring fresh glory to the Kingdom.

IN THIS CHAPTER

- Exploring Celtic deities
- Battling for land and control in the Emerald Isle
- Getting epic with tales of Irish heroes

Chapter 15

Myths from the Emerald Isle: Ireland and Celtic Mythology

Ireland has been inhabited for a long time, and the earliest inhabitants left strange structures of stone, as well as beautiful pottery and jewelry for archeologists to find. But those people were *prehistoric*, meaning they didn't write down their stories. So what's known of mythology from Éire (the Irish name for Ireland) is mostly from the Celts (pronounced *kelts*) who showed up and took over the culture starting around the first century CE. They originally weren't Christian (because almost no one was then), but Christianity became the main religion of the island by the fifth century CE. These people spoke a number of languages, including Irish, that all come under the umbrella term *Gaelic*.

TIP

Don't get caught with your foot in your mouth. The basketball team in Boston may be called the Celtics (pronounced *seltiks*), but the culture that took over Ireland was Celtic (pronounced *keltik*).

Celtic mythology is a complicated mixture of pre-Celtic stories and stories borrowed from the Judeo-Christian tradition as well as the ancient Greeks. In this chapter, most of the Celtic mythology comes from the Irish, but many of the gods

and goddesses we describe were common to other Celtic folks, both in the British Isles and in Europe. When we talk about "Celtic" myths or gods, we think that those characters and story were known across many Celtic peoples. If we say "Irish," we think the story is particular to the Irish.

In this chapter, we you take to the Emerald Isle (and beyond) for tales of Celtic gods and goddesses, some ancient Celtic holidays connected to myths, and some stories specifically from the ancient Irish about their creation and the queens, kings, and heroes of their mythological history.

Meeting Major Celtic Gods and Goddesses

Some of the main Celtic gods are these:

- **The Daghda:** The "Good God," the chief god of the pre-Christian Irish.
- **Donn:** The god of the dead, who can kill or resurrect people with his magic club.
- **Oenghus:** The god of love.
- **Oghma:** The god who invents the Irish alphabet.
- **Lug:** Said to be the sun god, father of the hero Cuchulain (whom we discuss in the later section "The Great Cattle Robbery"). Julius Caesar wrote that Lug was the most important Celtic god.
- **Dían Cécht:** The Divine Physician.
- **Manannán:** The sea-god.

And don't forget the goddesses:

- **Anu or Danu:** The mother of the gods.
- **Brigid:** The goddess of fertility and poetry and daughter of the Daghda. She eventually evolved into the Christian Saint Bride, or Saint Brigid.
- **Macha *(MA-ha),* Mórrígan, and Babd *(bayve)*:** Three goddesses of war and fertility (an odd combination!).
- **Scáthach:** The "Shadowy One," a sorceress and magic-teacher.
- **Boann:** A water goddess and lover of the Daghda.

CELTIC HALLOWEEN: SAMHAIN

Samhain, pronounced *SOW-in,* was a Celtic festival that took place at the end of the summer, when (it was said) tombs opened up and ghosts walked around on the earth. The center of this scary festival was the cave at Cruachain, in County Roscommon. The legend is that Mórrígan, the Great Queen, led the ghosts out to party and scare people on Samhain. That cave was a cave of *fairies*, or *faeries*. These mythical beings show up all over European mythology, and may even have their origin in Persian mythology (which we talk about in Chapter 20). While fairies are often depicted in art as beautiful little women with wings like dragonflies, in Celtic mythology they were considered to be either malicious spirits or, once Christianity took hold, angels that had been fired for offending the Christian God.

Claiming and Settling Ireland: Irish Foundation Myths

The ancient Irish believed that Cessair, a granddaughter of Noah (the man who built an ark and survived the Great Flood in the Hebrew Bible and the Christian Old Testament), first settled Ireland, but she and her people all died in the flood. You can read more about Noah and the flood in Chapter 17.

Parthalón, another descendant of Noah, tries to settle in Ireland 300 years after the flood. His people spend all their time fighting the *Fomorians,* monstrous children of Noah's cursed son Ham. Parthalón's folks hold their own until, alas, they all die of a plague.

Settling down in Ireland (finally!)

A generation after Parthalón (see the preceding section), the people of Nemhedh try yet again to settle Ireland. They don't do too well, either, between the Fomorians and disease, and the few survivors flee to Greece, where the Greeks make them slaves. These unfortunates are the people known as Fir Bolg. But they don't give up; they come back to Ireland, where they settle the whole island. Their last king is Eochaidh mac Eirc. He's a perfect king, and during his reign no one tells a single lie. (Husbands during the reign of Eochaidh mac Eirc must have been very, very good.)

The other mark of the perfection of Eochaidh mac Eirc's reign is, they said, that no rain fell the whole time — only dew. In any other part of the world, this drought would be a disaster! But it tells you something about the weather of Ireland.

Bearing gifts from Greece: Tuatha Dé Danaan

The final struggle for Ireland, in Celtic myth, is when the supernatural folk called Tuatha Dé Danaan arrive from Greece with magical treasures:

- The Cauldron of the Daghda, which is always full of food
- The Spear of Lug, which guarantees victory
- The Sword of Nuadhu Airgedlámn, which no enemy can escape
- The Stone of Destiny (Lia Fáil), which makes a man a lawful king if he stands on it and it shrieks

With these magical advantages, the Tuatha Dé Danaans defeat the Fir Bolg at the Battle of Magh Tuiredh.

REMEMBER

Historians believe that these myths are memories of a real war between the people of Ulster (the Tuatha Dé Danaan) and the people of Connacht (the Fir Bolg).

Making Celtic History: Key Players and Tales of Irish Mythology

In this section, we share a few epic Irish stories and introduce you to some Irish heroes, including Wolf-Queen Mebd (whom you might know by the other spelling of her name, Maeve), Fiona Mac Cumhaill (or Finn MacCool), and the legendary St. Patrick, who lived an adventurous life before becoming a Saint.

The Wolf-Queen: Mebd (Maeve)

REMEMBER

The Irish name Mebd really is pronounced *mayve*, which is why it's often written (for non–Irish-speakers) as "Maeve."

Maeve is a strong and tough Queen; she has to be, given how hard and dangerous her life is. She was called the "Wolf-Queen" because her fierce beauty devasted the men who saw her. Her story appears in a tale called Cath Bóinde (The Battle of the Boyne), and it's like a real-life *Game of Thrones!* Her father is *High King* of Ireland (the King who ruled over other kings). He marries Maeve off to Conchobar, King of Ulster. The marriage doesn't work out; Maeve leaves him and then comes back to murder Conchobar's second wife.

TARA THE HILL, NOT THE GIRL

The Hill of Tara, which in Irish is Teamhair or Cnoc na Teamhrach, is a sacred hill in what is now County Meath. It was said to be the ancient site where kings were crowned and where the nobles met for political meetings or to plan wars. The site is dotted with stone monuments going all the way back to the Stone Age, 3,200 BCE. "Tara" was the name of Scarlett O'Hara's plantation in Margaret Mitchell's *Gone with the Wind.* Today, "Tara" is the name of a lot of places in Ireland. *Tara Road* is a bestselling novel (and later movie) set in modern Ireland. The author of that novel was, interestingly, named Maeve Binchy, taking her first name from Queen Maeve.

Maeve's father then defeats Tinni mac Conri, King of Connacht, and makes Maeve Queen of Connacht. But Maeve and Tinni become lovers, so Tinni gets (part of) his throne back. Her first husband, Conchobar, comes back and rapes Maeve after a big political meeting at *The Hill of Tara* (an important place of gathering in Irish mythology, not just the name of Scarlett O'Hara's house in *Gone with the Wind*. Check out the nearby sidebar for details about this otherworldly spot.). Maeve's current and former husbands fight, and Tinni loses.

After her second husband's death, Maeve briefly marries Eochaid Dála, a warrior of Connacht, but also takes a guy named Ailill mac Máta as a lover. Of course, husband and lover have to fight a duel, and the lover wins. So Maeve marries Ailill mac Máta. One of their martial spats incites the action of another important myth, the Cattle Raid of Cooley (see the following section).

Queen Maeve is a superhero character in the graphic novels and television series *The Boys*, but she has more in common with the DC Comics character Wonder Woman than the Irish queen Mabd.

The Great Cattle Robbery: An Irish Epic

The Táin Bó Cuailnge *(toyn bo cooley)*, or The Cattle Raid of Cooley, is one of the most important epic myths of Ireland, like the *Iliad* for the Greeks (see Chapter 7). It's set in the time of Maeve, perhaps in the first century BCE.

The oldest version of The Táin Bó Cuailnge that anyone can still read is the Book of Leinster, a manuscript from the 12th century.

The story is about the ongoing wars between Ulster and Connacht and starts with Queen Maeve from the preceding section. One night, she and her fourth husband, Ailill, get into an argument about who's richer. Maeve isn't one to let things go, so the two make an inventory of all their wealth. They're pretty much equal except that Ailill has a beautiful white bull and Maeve has nothing like it.

What really stings is that the white bull had been born to one of Maeve's cows. What really really stings is that the cow has wandered off because it disapproves of having a woman as its owner.

Maeve decides to rent a bull just as good as the king's, and the only one that fits the bill is the Brown Bull of Cuailnge, owned by Daire mac Fiachna, King of Ulster. Maeve asks to borrow the bull for one year, offering land, a bunch of (normal) cattle, and "her own friendly thighs." The King of Ulster is happy to seal the bargain!

However, when the king agrees, the messenger from Maeve says, "Great, because Maeve was going to take the bull either way!" The deal's off, and another epic war between Connacht and Ulster begins.

In the course of this war, the Ulstermen have a great hero on their side, Culchulain *(koo-hool-n),* who kills hundreds of warriors from Connacht. The only times Maeve's army makes progress are when Culchulain periodically sleeps to regain his strength and have the god Lug heal his wounds. Maeve does manage to steal the brown bull during the fighting, however.

Culchulain goes into battle with a *warp-spasm* (an insane killing rage). At one point, he even kills his own foster brother, who's in Maeve's army. When Ulster's victory is almost complete, Culchulain spares Maeve because she's a woman.

Even after the human war, the white bull and the brown bull fight an epic battle all over Ireland. The brown bull eventually returns to Ulster with the dead white bull on its horns, but its heart gives out and it dies just as it gets home. Ulster and Connacht make peace, which lasts for seven years. Maeve never forgets and never forgives, though. She conspires with some other warriors to kill Culchulain. First, they invite him to a meal and serve him dog meat. (There's a powerful taboo against eating dog, but there's also a powerful taboo against refusing hospitality.) Culchulain eats the dog and becomes both physically and spiritually weak. Maeve gives her warriors magic spears, and these (barely!) allow them to overcome the weakened hero. To make sure he is dead, they cut off his head.

The great Irish hero: Fionn mac Cumhaill (Finn MacCool)

Fionn mac Cumhaill, or Finn MacCool, is the greatest hero of Irish mythology. The "Duanaire Finn" ("Songs of Finn") from the third century tell his stories. Finn is the son of Cumhaill, the King of Leinster. Scholarly mythology nerds have debated whether Finn is based on a real person or is purely mythological; most think he's more myth than man.

Being Finn MacCool: The prequel

Finn's story begins before his birth, when his father, Cumhaill, goes to war with High King Conn, who rules all of Ireland from Tara. At the start of the war, Cumhaill falls in love with Muirne, the daughter of a *Druid* (a priest in Likthe pre-Christian religion of the Celts). She gets pregnant, and her father vows to kill Cumhaill.

Cumhaill had heard a prophesy (from another Druid) that his son will be a great man, so he sends Muirne off to have her baby in hiding.

Sucking on the Thumb of Knowledge

The war comes, and Cumhaill is killed. But Muirne has her baby, Finn MacCool. The young Finn has a tutor, the Druid Fionn. This tutor urges Finn to catch the Salmon of Knowledge. He does so and fillets it for their dinner. But while he's cooking it, he burns his thumb and gets a blister. When he sucks on the blister, he suddenly realizes that he knows everything. This event is the start of Finn MacCool's Thumb of Knowledge; from then on, at moments of crisis, the great hero stops to suck his thumb and learn what to do.

Finn grows up to become leader of the elite fighting force of Tara, the *Fianna* (a legendary band of Celtic warriors). These guys are the Navy SEALs of mythological Ireland. Many of Finn's adventures — too many to tell here, we're afraid — involve fighting enemies, monsters, and ghosts with the Fianna. They always win, either with strength or with cunning and some thumb-sucking by Finn.

To join the Fianna, a candidate had to fight off 9 men with spears, using only a shield and stick; to beat all challengers at a cross-country race; and to memorize 12 books of Irish poetry.

Finn has a wife, a magical deer-woman, and they have a son named Ossian (in Irish he is Oisín), who becomes a legendary poet and historian.

Finishing Finn

You can find two versions of the end of Finn MacCool's life. One story says that when Finn is a very old man, a fisherman kills him with a harpoon, hoping to become famous for killing the great hero. But in this story, the Fianna immediately cut off the fisherman's head, and no one knows his name.

Another version says that Finn goes to sleep in a cave, where he'll sleep until the *Dord Fiann,* the Horn of the Fianna, is blown three times. Then he'll wake up and save the Irish people.

The Snake Charmer: Saint Patrick

When people think about Ireland, they probably think about Saint Patrick. This myth is a case of someone who was a real historical person but who has also become a mythological figure.

Most of what's known about Patrick is from a book called *Confession* that is said to be his autobiography. He grew up in Britain as the son of a wealthy family but was kidnapped as a boy and sold into slavery in Ireland. He spent six years herding sheep all by himself in the hills. This long, lonely experience led him to the Christian faith.

After getting a message from God along the lines of "Your ship is about to sail," Patrick wandered away from his master's fields and caught a ship leaving Ireland. The ship seems to have been wrecked, or at least stranded, on some remote shore, and after 28 days in the wilderness, the crew and passengers were starving. Patrick prayed to God for food, and immediately a herd of pigs came over the hill. Dinner was served!

Irish traditions say Patrick returned to his family but realized that his future in the church. He came to Ireland around the year 432 CE as a bishop, going on to spread Christianity and help bring peace among the warring kingdoms.

The more mythological stories about Patrick include the following:

- He uses the Irish *shamrock,* the three-leaved clover, to teach about the Christian Trinity: Father, Son, and Holy Ghost.
- He argues with High King Laoghaire at Tara and wins him over to Christianity.
- He's on speaking terms with God and the angels, climbing up Croagh Patrick, a hill in County Mayo, to talk to them.
- He writes a prayer called "Saint Patrick's Breastplate."

But the most famous story about Patrick is how he gets rid of all the snakes in Ireland. The story is that Patrick climbs up Croagh Patrick and rings a bell. That's all it takes! The snakes look up, hear the bell, and conveniently slither away out of Ireland forever.

Scientists, however, credit the lack of snakes to the Ice Ages. When ice covered much of the northern countries, it was way too cold for snakes. As the planet warmed again, Ireland was cut off from other lands by the rising sea levels. So while snakes spread from the equator into most of Europe, they never made it to Ireland.

5 The Cradle(s) of Civilization: African and Near-Eastern Mythology

IN THIS PART . . .

Explore the mythology of the people of central and southern Africa.

Check out the myths of the Mesopotamians and Hebrews, including some big flood stories and the legend of Gilgamesh.

Examine Egyptian mythology's animal-headed gods and ideas about life after death.

Access the mythology of northern Africa, where the Bantu, Egyptians, Phoenicians, Greeks, and Romans all pitched in, along with Islam.

Peruse Persian mythology, in which east and west came together for 1,001 great stories.

IN THIS CHAPTER

- Exploring African gods and spirits
- Creating people, Bantu style
- Causing trouble with trickster heroes

Chapter 16

Central and Southern Africa: The Bantu's Eternal Earth and Sly Animals

Africa is now home to more than 1.4 billion people, who speak 3,000 languages. In terms of environment and culture, it's probably the most diverse continent on Earth. No surprise, then, that Africa is home to a huge diversity of beliefs and, along with them, mythologies!

In this chapter, we give you a peek into the mythology of central and southern Africa. We look at the origin of the term *Bantu* and explore what it means to have an animistic view of the world. We tell you some African stories about the creation of humans and animals, meet some tricky animals from African mythology, and follow the exploits of the tough baby hero Uhlakayana.

The People and Their Beliefs

The peoples of central and southern Africa are often grouped together and called the Bantu peoples. They speak over 500 distinct languages that are all related to each other. The Zulu people, of southern Africa, are one of the largest groups among the Bantu.

Sharing with the neighbors

The mythology of the Bantu people goes back 4,000 years, and that means not only a lot of sharing but also a lot of diversity from region to region and nation to nation.

TECHNICAL STUFF

The word *Bantu* comes either from the Zulu word *abantu,* which just means "people," or from the Latin *Abanteus,* meaning "person from Ethiopia." In the ancient world of the lands around the Mediterranean Sea, "Ethiopia" meant "all of Africa south of Egypt"; the modern nation of Ethiopia is in East Africa, south of Egypt and Eritreia, and north of Somalia. The Roman poet Ovid uses the word *Abanteus* in the *Metamorphoses* (see Chapter 11). *Bantu* as a word describing all these related languages and cultures is a modern invention from the 1800s.

The Maasai people are a much smaller, highly independent group who live in Tanzania and Kenya near Mount Kilimanjaro. Their mythologies share many elements with the Bantu's even though their culture and languages are distinct.

Worshipping spirits and gods

REMEMBER

Most of the religions of central and southern Africa are *animistic* — that is, they focus on spirits that are everywhere: spirits in plants, animals, rivers, and mountains and the spirits of dead human ancestors. The spirits of animals and of ancestors are important across all the Bantu people. All these spirits provide stories and lessons and can give advice to living people.

Bantu mythology doesn't generally focus on a single god, like the beliefs of the Hebrews, or even of one "big god," like Zeus the Greeks worshipped (see Chapter 4). The Bantu people tell stories about many gods, though. Sometimes the gods live in the sky. Sometimes (like the Greek gods) they live on high mountains, such as Mount Kenya (as the Kikuyu peoples believed), or on *Ol Doinyo Lengai,* the "Mountain of God," which the Maasai believe is in northern Tanzania.

But some Bantu peoples do have a high god, like *Olorun* of the Yoruba people or *Chukwu* of the Igbo people. Some recognize a trinity of supreme gods, like the three-way division of divine duties among *Nyame, Nyankopon,* and *Odomankoma* that the Akan people honor.

Believing in only one god is *monotheism.* Belief in many gods is *polytheism.* A polytheistic worldview that elevates one top god is *henotheism.* Belief that gods exist for everything or in everything is *pantheism.*

The Zulu people recognize Unkulunkulu as the king of the gods/god of thunder and lightning and Nomkhubulwane as the queen of the gods. Nomkhubulwane can change into the form of any animal. She's the most important god for people because she's in charge of rain and growing food. She also is said to have invented beer!

Myths about Humanity

For many of the Bantu people, the world (land, plants, animals) is eternal. It has always been here, so they have no creation myth like the *Theogony* of the Greeks (see Chapter 3) or Genesis for the Hebrews (Chapter 17). But as we explain in the following sections, they do have stories about the origins and mortality of human beings. And about ogres.

Creating humans from bamboo . . . or maybe Omumborombonga?

Different Bantu groups have different myths about where humans came from. The Zulu say the first humans crawled out of a thick bamboo stalk. Some of the Xhosa people say humans crawled out of holes in the ground. The Herero people say that human beings came out of the root-holes of the *Omumborombonga* tree (a tree also known as the Leadwood tree because its wood is the heaviest in the world, or to botanists as *Combretum imberbe*), followed by their herds of cattle.

In the region around what's now Namibia, the ancient stories say the top god, Ndjambi Karunga, came out of the Omumborombonga tree with his wife, Kamangundu. Ndjambi Karunga's main characteristic is kindness. He lives in the sky but at the same time is everywhere.

The ancient people of Africa had noticed, of course, that from nation to nation, people had different skin colors. One Bantu myth says that Kamangundu's children came out of the Omumborombonga and all killed an ox to celebrate the occasion. Some of the people carried away the ox's liver to eat, and these became the people with dark black skin. Others carried away the ox's lungs, and these became the people with redder skin. A fight over who would get the ox's skin was what separated the people into hostile, warring nations.

TECHNICAL STUFF

The scientific name of the Omumborombonga tree is *Combretum imberbe.* But it's often called the "leadwood tree" because its dense wood doesn't float.

Dying for dogs and chameleons

Some myths deal with the problem of death. Why do people have to die? One Bantu myth says that the god Ruhanga gave all humans the blessing of immortality. But one old woman complained about it because her dog had died. She demanded that Ruhanga treat every animal fairly, presumably hoping for immortal dogs. But Ruhanga made everything "fair" by making people as mortal as their dogs.

Another myth says that after humans came out of their holes in the ground (as we describe in the preceding section), the spirits sent a chameleon to deliver the happy news that humans would never have to die. But chameleons are slow; a much faster lizard got there first and (to cause trouble) informed humans that they all *must* die someday.

Changing form: When your man is a real ogre

Many Bantu myths involve "ogres," which may be in *amazimu* or *makishi* or *irimu* form. The Wachaga people say that the *irimu* is a man who can change his shape into a leopard, a "were-leopard." One story says that an *irimu* came to a village looking for a wife. A father was about to offer his daughter until he noticed the groom-to-be had a second mouth in the back of his head. Not normal!

The Ambundu people call their "ogres" *makishi* and say they have many heads. When a hero fights a *makishi* and cuts off one head, another grows right back. In one story, a *makishi* took a human woman as his wife. When their first baby was born, it had only one head. The *makishi* threatened to eat the baby and the wife if any other children were born with only one head. The second baby had two heads, so no one got eaten and the family was okay.

The Trickster Spirits: Huveane and Uhlakayana

Bantu mythology has many stories about a trickster, either an animal or human who gets out of trouble — or causes trouble — by being clever. Tricksters are popular mythical characters in myths from all cultures. Some of these tricksters help people by outwitting their enemies and bringing them gifts such as fire.

TIP

The Greek trickster-hero Prometheus is a helpful trickster (see Chapter 3). Others aren't so nice; Loki in Norse myths is sometimes downright evil. (See Chapter 12 for more about him.) The character Odysseus from Greek mythology (see Chapter 7) is tricky for his own benefit, to help him survive a long journey. In the mythology of the indigenous people of North America tricksters were often animals that also could seem humanlike; they were ambiguous creatures. Examples include the Coyote in the Southwest, the Mink in the Pacific Northwest, and Wisakedjak, a rabbit trickster hero known to Eastern tribes. (See Chapter 25.)

African mythology has lots of tricksters, and their stories may have come across to North America, carried by enslaved people.

Trickster number 1: Huveane

Huveane is one of the tricksters that appear in Bantu mythology. Huveane is sometimes called "the first man," even though his story begins with his parents. This kind of logical problem is one that mythologies around the world never care about.

One story tells how Huveane, a man, produced his own baby. In one version, he swallowed medicine intended for his mother and got pregnant. In another, he grew a magic taro plant, and its root turned into a baby. (*Taro* is *Colocasia*, sold at your garden store as Elephant Ear; its roots are starchy like potatoes.) Huveane hid his baby in a hollow tree and went out to feed it every day. When Huveane's parents got suspicious about what he was doing, they followed him, found the baby, and threw it in a pile of firewood. When Huveane went back to the tree and found the baby missing, he fell into a depression. After a while, his parents asked him to fetch firewood. Huveane discovered his baby, evidently safe and sound, and put him back in the tree.

MYTHOLOGICAL ECOLOGY

The ecology of central and southern Africa is incredibly diverse. This fact shows up in mythology. Sometimes the same stories turn up in different places but with animals replacing the human heroes. Uhlakayana may sometimes be a weasel or the clever and sneaky hyena. Sometimes his enemies may be a lion or elephant, so the clever trickster defeats strength with his cunning.

Because different parts of Africa are home to different animals, a hyena hero in one place may be a rabbit hero in another. The Khosa people thought rabbits were stupid, not clever, so their trickster is an antelope.

The villagers thought Huveane was doing witchcraft, making his own baby, and convinced his parents to try to kill him. They first poisoned his bowl of milk, but Huveane was suspicious and poured the bowl on the ground. They then dug a pit next to the fire where Huveane always sat, but that evening he sat between his brothers, pushing one of them to the side, so his brother fell into the pit. Then the parents dug a pit outside Huveane's hut, but in the morning he jumped over it, and so did all of his sheep and goats. Finally, they hid a man with a spear in a bundle of grass. Huveane's father told him to go get the bundle and bring it to the fire. Huveane went, and some distance from the bundle, threw his spear at it. The guy inside yelped and ran away. Huveane told his father, "I tried to do what you asked, but my bundle of grass ran away!"

Trickster number 2: Uhlakayana

Uhlakayana (sometimes called Hlakanyana) is the trickster son of a village chieftain's wife. He either was as small as a weasel or maybe was actually a weasel. He could speak before he was even born. In this section, we share some of the more well-known of the many, many tales about Uhlakayana the trickster.

Uhlakayana, or other Bantu "trickster" characters, may be the origin of the stories about "Br'er Rabbit," which show up in the controversial *Tales of Uncle Remus*, published between 1881 and 1907 by Joel Chandler Harris. He was a white man from Atlanta, but his books claim to report the stories told by Black Americans in the 1800s.

One tough baby

As a newborn, Uhlakayana challenged the grown men of his village to a contest. He threw a big piece of beef over a fence and into a cattle pen. Whoever got the beef first, he declared, was the "real man." All the men of the village raced to the gate in the fence, on the other side of the pen. But Uhlakayana — who, remember, was a newborn baby — just wriggled through the fenceposts into the pen and grabbed the beef. He gave it to his mother.

Your mom is for dinner

In another story, Uhlakayana goes on a journey but quickly gets caught in an ogre's bird trap. The ogre is going to cook him and eat him right there, but Uhlakayana convinces the ogre that he'll taste nasty unless the ogre's own mother cooks him properly. The ogre agrees and brings Uhlakayana to his mom.

Uhlakayana convinces the ogre mom to play "let's pretend to boil each other." Uhlakayana goes first in the pot (when the water isn't yet that hot). After a few minutes, he says it's the mother's turn. She takes off her clothes and gets in.

Uhlakayana claps a lid on the pot and cooks her. Then, wearing her clothes, he serves her as dinner to her ogre son and his friends.

In some versions of the story, the ogre then chases Uhlakayana (in other versions an iguana or a monitor lizard may chase him). Uhlakayana gets to a river, which he can't cross. While his enemy is approaching, he hides inside a piece of wood. His pursuer gets to the riverbank and sees footsteps leading to the water. Assuming that Uhlakayana has swum down the river, the enemy grabs the piece of wood and throws it across the river in frustration. So Uhlakayana escapes.

Leopard cubs for lunch

A lot of these stories are pretty harsh — lots of animals eating other animals! In another story, Uhlakayana feasts on a litter of leopard cubs by offering to build the mother leopard a hut where she can nurse all the cubs. He builds the hut but brings the cubs in one at a time instead of all at once. After each cub nurses, he eats it. The mother leopard doesn't realize the trick until it's too late. When she rushes out of the hut, Uhlakayana has booby-trapped the door with sharp stakes, and the leopard is killed.

The house that Uhlakayana (or maybe Huveane) built

One set of mythological stories are evidently common across central Africa, but nobody today knows where they originated. An English missionary named Henry Callaway recorded and published these stories in a book in 1867 CE. Callaway was a bishop in the Anglican Church, and he sometimes refused to report parts of a local African story he considered offensive. So the story in this section doesn't have an end.

The story has one of the trickster heroes trading up goods and possessions, and (through his cleverness *and generosity*) getting richer and richer. One version of it, told by the Xhosa people (and reported by Bishop Callaway), has Uhlakayana as the hero. He comes home to his mother carrying an *umdiandiuane,* which is like a sweet potato. He asks his mother to cook it for him, and she says she will if he'll go milk the cow. When he comes back from milking the cow, his mother has eaten his sweet potato! She's sorry and says he can keep the milk pail.

He then comes to some boys who are trying to milk a cow into broken pots. Uhlakayana lends them his new milk pail, but the last boy breaks it. When Uhlakayana says, "Give me the pail my mother gave me for eating my sweet potato," they give him an *assagai,* a kind of small knife. He then comes across some women trying to slice liver by using splinters of sugar cane. He lends them

his knife, which they break, but they give him an ax as a replacement. Some women trying to cut firewood borrow his ax, break it, and repay him with a blanket. Some men sleeping outside borrow his blanket, rip it, and give him a shield. Some guys hunting a leopard borrow his shield, break it, and give him a sword. You get the idea.

Bishop Callaway doesn't tell how the story ends. Maybe it doesn't have an end? The fun may have been in telling the story, which would've gotten longer and longer: "Give me back my shield, which I got for my blanket, which I got for my ax, which I got for my knife, which I got for my pail because my mother ate my sweet potato!" And so on.

IN THIS CHAPTER

- Making not-so-nice with the Mesopotamian gods
- Creating the world with *Enûma Elish*
- Getting to know Gilgamesh
- Tiptoeing around Hebrew mythology

Chapter 17

Floods, Mud, and Gods: Mesopotamian and Hebrew Mythology

Mesopotamia, which is now Iraq, was the cradle of civilization and the source of many of the oldest myths known. (*Mesopotamia* means "the land between the rivers"; in this case, that's the Tigris and the Euphrates.) By the way, "Mesopotamia" refers to the whole area. In that area, a variety of civilizations rose and fell — a really good description of that would take a whole book — but the biggies were the Sumerian, the Akkadians, and the Babylonians. Also in the general vicinity (but farther west, toward the Mediterranean Sea) were the ancient Hebrew people, who weren't a mighty empire by local standards but became important for other reasons.

In this chapter, we explore the mythologies of the Mesopotamian and Hebrew peoples. This chapter takes you back to the beginning with the Sumerian story of Gilgamesh, which is just about the oldest written epic in existence. From around 2000 BCE, it tells of a Sumerian hero dealing with gods and monsters and creating a new civilization. We walk you through the Babylonian creation myth, the *Enûma Elish*, a wild and violent story similar to the wild, violent creation story by the Greek poet Hesiod. This chapter shows you how the mythological creation stories in the Hebrew Bible (the Old Testament) are radically different from anything seen in Greek or Mesopotamian mythology.

Mesopotamian Gods: Okay, We Fear You . . . You Happy?

The characters in Mesopotamian mythology worshipped their gods, but they didn't particularly like them. When the old man Utnapishtim offered a sacrifice to the gods after the Great Flood, he said that they "swarmed like flies over the sacrifice, attracted by the sweet smell." When the goddess Ishtar suggested that the hero Gilgamesh have sex with her, he said, "Are you crazy? Get lost!" (See the later section "Just say no to Ishtar.")

This attitude — fear mixed with contempt — may have come from the harsh environment of the world between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers. The characters in this mythology offer sacrifices to appease the gods but don't sing many hymns of praise to them. Mesopotamian mythology certainly doesn't have any human heroes being buddies with the gods, such as the Greek hero Odysseus and his goddess friend Athena.

TECHNICAL STUFF

The summers in Mesopotamia were brutally hot and the winters fiercely cold. Though the Nile River in Egypt flooded in a predictable and beneficial way, bringing new rich soil to the people, the Tigris and Euphrates flooded at odd times, and it was catastrophic. Huge thunderstorms lashed the plains of Iraq.

The Ancient *Near East* — a traditional term that describes the lands between the Mediterranean Sea and the Indus River — was home to big important civilizations and some small important ones, too. What was it near? The Europeans who gave it that name. Check out the map of the region in Figure 17-1.

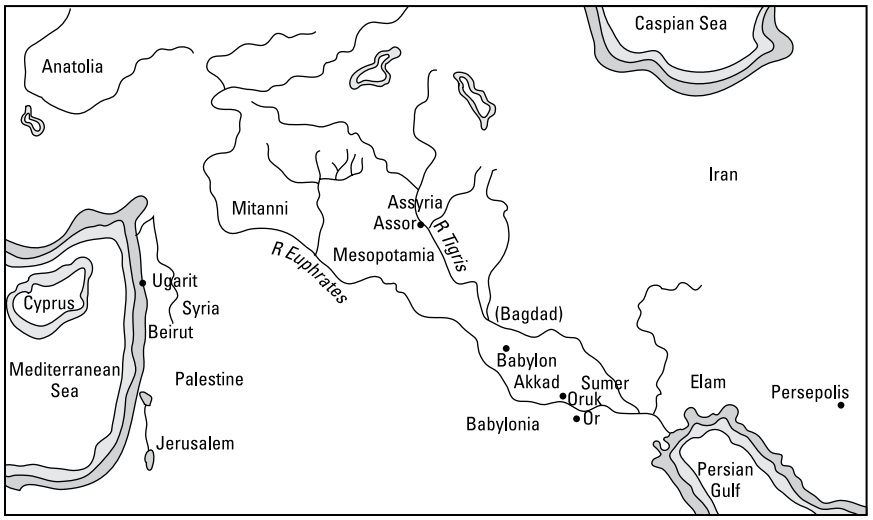

FIGURE 17-1: A map of Mesopotamia and the surrounding area.

Who are these gods? Any list is incomplete because Mesopotamia was home to many civilizations over many thousands of years: Sumerians, Hittites, Assyrians, Babylonians, and Persians last of all. But the famous myths, the ones such as the *Enûma Elish* and the story of Gilgamesh, were common to Sumerians, Assyrians, and Babylonians, and they feature some of the following gods. ***Note:*** Most of these gods have different names in Sumerian and Akkadian; if one of the names occurs in another myth that we describe in this chapter, we put that one first:

- **Anu** (or sometimes just An) is the father of the gods but not the king of the gods. He's the god of the top part of heaven. He's the most powerful god but also the most remote; he doesn't have much business with folks on earth. He mated with Ki.
- **Ki** (who also goes by the names Ninhursag, Ninmah, and Nintu) is the Earth. Her relationship with Anu produces Enlil.
- **Enlil** is the Air. Enlil is less powerful than Anu but more active. He makes things happen on earth. When Enlil was born, everything was dark and boring.
- **Nanna** (or Sin) is the moon. He is the father of Shamash.
- **Shamash** (or Utu) is the Sun. (The Arabic word for "sun" is still *Shams.*) She, in turn, gave birth to Ishtar.
- **Ishtar** (or Inanna) is the goddess of love and war.
- **Ea** (also Nudimmud or Enki) is the wise god, the one who keeps peace among the other gods. He has a lot of work keeping Ishtar in line because she's usually nothing but trouble in the myths that survive from Mesopotamia.
- **Marduk** is *the* god of Babylon. In many of the earlier myths, Marduk doesn't appear at all. It seems he was particular to Babylon and came to rule the other gods when Babylon came to rule the other peoples of Mesopotamia. The *Enûma Elish* is the story of how Marduk comes to be King. That poem was probably written to legitimize Babylonian rule over other people: "Our god beat up your gods!"
- **Kur** is the god of the underworld, which he shares with Ereshkigal.
- **Ereshkigal** is Ishtar's sister, goddess of *Kur*, the land of the dead.

Enûma Elish: The Babylonian Creation Story

The *Enûma Elish* is also called the "Babylonian Genesis," but it's older than the Babylonians. The story is recorded on clay tablets that archaeologists found at the ruins of the city of Nineveh, the old capital of the Assyrian Empire. Other tablets,

with other bits of the story, turned up in the ruins of the city of Uruk. These tablets aren't that old by Mesopotamia's standards of "old." They date to between 1000 and 500 BCE, so they were "written" after civilization had existed in the area for about 3,000 years already. So you're dealing with a really old story here.

The name *Enûma Elish*, by the way, simply comes from the first words of the story, which is in the form of poetry: "*When above* (the translation of "enûma elish") the heavens had not yet been named. . . ." You can find the "family tree" of *Enûma Elish* in Figure 17-2.

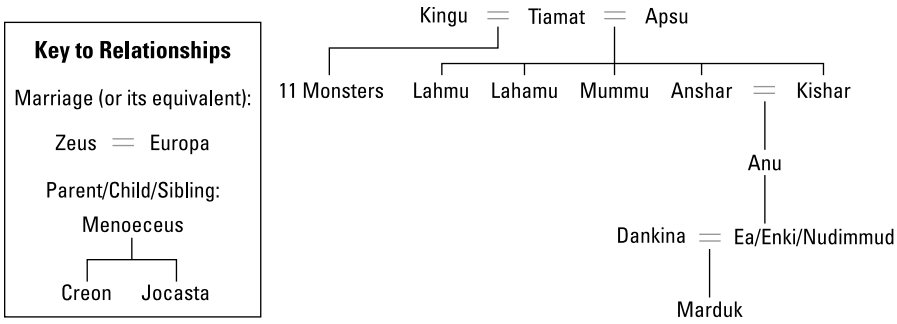

FIGURE 17-2: Grandma Tiâmat and her divine kin: a family tree of the *Enûma Elish*.

TIP

This version of the creation of the gods isn't entirely consistent with other stories about the relationships among the gods, but that's the way mythology is.

Just one big happy family

Before heaven, earth, or anything exists, Tiâmat, Apsû, and their son, Mummu, are around. Tiâmat is the goddess of sweet water and Apsû the god of salt water. Mummu is the mist that rises from the water.

Then Tiâmat and Apsû have four more kids, two sets of twins. First they have Lahmu and Lahâmu and then Anshar and Kishar, who are smarter and stronger than the first set of twins. Anshar and Kishar have a child together named Anu. Anu becomes a sky god.

Anu then has a kid named Ea, who also goes by the names Nudimmud and Enki. Ea is far and away the best of all the gods, even though he's the youngest. He's god of underground water, magic, and making good plans.

House party

Most of the younger gods — Lahmu, Lahâmu, Anshar, Kishar, Anu, and Ea — take to partying and staying up late, which prevents Apsû and Tiâmat from getting a good night's sleep. Evidently the only god who isn't in on the ruckus is Mummu, the first-born son of Apsû and Tiâmat. Apsû and Mummu complain to the younger gods, who don't listen. So father and son decide more drastic steps are necessary. They describe their plan to Tiâmat: They're going to kill all the other gods and get some sleep.

Tiâmat is outraged and wants nothing to do with it. But Apsû and Mummu decide to go ahead with their plan. When the other gods learn of it — it evidently isn't a secret — they panic and wander around aimlessly.

Ea in the house

Only Ea knows what to do about the murder plot (see the preceding section). He makes a magic circle around the other gods to protect them and then utters a spell to put the whammy on his great-grandfather, Apsû. Apsû falls asleep, and Ea takes off Apsû's crown and shining power and puts them on himself. Then he kills Apsû, imprisons Mummu, and builds a house on Apsû's body, which he names (in a fit of originality) Apsû.

With his nice new house built, he gets a wife, the goddess Damkina, and they have a son: Marduk (see Figure 17-3). Ea makes his son Marduk doubly equal to the gods. What *doubly equal* actually means is unclear.

A corporate reorg and some new leadership

The goddess Tiâmat is still upset about the death of her husband (see the preceding section for that story). She has a new husband, a god named Kingu, and he eggs her on. She decides to get revenge and starts having snake-monster babies to serve in her army. When she's given birth to 11 of these, she's ready to make her move.

After Tiâmat and Kingu begin plotting revenge, Ea finds out about Tiâmat's plans and panics. Then he pulls himself together and goes to his granddad, Anshar, for advice. Anshar suggests he use his magic to defeat Tiâmat; it worked with her first husband, after all. Ea tries, but his magic doesn't work at all.

FIGURE 17-3: Marduk, son of Ea and Damkina.

© Wikipedia

Then Ea's father, Anu, tries to reason with her, but that doesn't work either. Because magic and negotiations have both failed, physical force seems to be the only option left.

Marduk to the rescue!

Anshar, Anu, and Ea call the young Marduk and tell him of the problem. Ea and Anu train him, giving him super-magic-god powers until they think he's ready. When he's trained, Marduk agrees to take on the war with Tiâmat but demands complete authority as the Number One God if he's successful.

Starting a fighting war with their matriarch and acknowledging young Marduk as the king of the gods requires the approval of all the *Annunaki* (the word the gods use to describe themselves). So Anshar sends Kaka, a messenger god who serves as Anshar's secretary, to call Lahmu, Lahâmu, Kishar, and Damkina to join them. They're all terrified when they hear of the problem, but a good meal with lots of wine makes everyone feel better.

Marduk comes in to show his stuff. They put a robe on the floor, and Marduk speaks a spell that makes it explode. He then speaks another spell and fixes it. All the gods are impressed and bow to Marduk, praising him as their king.

The final showdown: Bridges to earth, sky, and Babylon

Marduk goes off to face Tiâmat and her new hubby, Kingu. Kingu is terrified and doesn't resist, but Tiâmat is made of sterner stuff and puts up a good fight. Marduk finally beats her by blowing a terrible wind into her mouth, causing her to puff up, and then shooting an arrow down her throat and into her heart.

Marduk takes the tablet of Fate from Kingu and wears it around his neck. He divides Tiâmat's body into two pieces and makes one piece the sky and the other the earth. He sets up constellations in the skies and gets the seasons running. He then kills his captive, Kingu, and makes human beings by mixing Kingu's blood with clay.

He orders half of the Annunaki to be sky gods and the other half to be earth gods. They're so grateful to him for saving them from Tiâmat that they build the city of Babylon in his honor.

Gilgamesh: Epically Sumerian

The story of Gilgamesh is over 4,000 years old and has some striking similarities to stories in the Bible. It was common to all the peoples of Mesopotamia, and it shows up in Sumerian and Babylonian versions. Unfortunately, no single really good ancient text tells the whole story of Gilgamesh. Any version of the story has to be put together out of parts. Some are older, some are newer, and some are in different languages from different places. But the story of Gilgamesh, King of Uruk, still lives.

Gilgamesh the king: Big man in Uruk

Gilgamesh is the legendary king of the city of Uruk. He's the son of the previous king, Lugalbanda, and the goddess Ninsun. According to the story, he's actually two-thirds god and one-third human. According to the Hittite version of the story, he's 11 meters (36 feet) tall!

At the beginning of the story, Gilgamesh is bored. He's king, he's better looking and stronger than everyone else, but he doesn't have enough to do. So he gets into trouble and acts like a jerk. He abuses his subjects, has sex with all their daughters and sons, and becomes increasingly unbearable until the people of Uruk beg the god Anu to do something.

A new drinking buddy who's a total animal

Anu arranges for Aruru, a goddess of creation, to make a friend for Gilgamesh. This friend is Enkidu. At first, Enkidu is mostly an animal. He lives in the wilderness and talks to the other animals. But one day he runs across a prostitute from the city and has sex with her. After that, the animals won't have anything to do with him.

So he goes back to the prostitute, who teaches him how to be civilized. He learns to stop drinking milk and start drinking wine, to wear clothes, and to comb his hair. Then he enters the city to find Gilgamesh.

When Gilgamesh and Enkidu see each other, they immediately fight. They punch and wrestle, and eventually Gilgamesh gets the better of Enkidu. But the fight is so close that Gilgamesh knows he's met his match. So they stop fighting and become best friends.

Enkidu suggests they may enjoy an adventure, so the two set off to kill Humbaba, a monster that lives in the great cedar forest to the west. They take their axes. As they walk, Enkidu has second thoughts, but Gilgamesh ridicules him into continuing. As they approach the monster, Gilgamesh himself gets scared, and Enkidu throws his earlier words back in his face. In the end they hold hands for moral support, approach Humbaba together, and kill him.

Just say no to Ishtar

When the two buddies get back to Uruk, Gilgamesh gets all dressed up to let the people admire their heroic king. He looks *good,* and Ishtar, the goddess of love and war, develops a huge crush on him. But when she propositions Gilgamesh, he laughs in her face. "Yeah, right!" he says, "I remember all the other guys you had sex with, and look what happened to them! Forget it!" (Ishtar had turned one ex-lover into a wolf and another into a mole.)

Ishtar, disappointed and embarrassed, sets the Bull of Heaven loose to tear up the crops and terrorize the people of Uruk. Gilgamesh and Enkidu successfully kill the bull.

Bittersweet realizations: The price of male bonding

After the fight with the bull, Enkidu falls ill, and after 12 days, he dies. Gilgamesh is distraught; Enkidu's death has reminded him that he, too, must die someday, despite being such a hero. So he sets out alone on another quest: to find the secret of immortality.

Searching for immortality

Gilgamesh travels a long, long way, far outside what the Mesopotamians considered the known world. On his journey, he fights various lions and dragons, negotiates with the Man-Scorpion to pass through the dark mountain, and finally comes to a restaurant.

The proprietor is Siduri, the Woman-Who-Makes-Wine. She first tries to talk Gilgamesh out of his journey but eventually gives him a tip: Why not talk to the one guy who actually became immortal, Utnapishtim? So Gilgamesh goes off to find Utnapishtim, which requires crossing the Water of Death.

Utnapishtim's flood story and advice

After a scary journey, Gilgamesh meets Utnapishtim. He isn't impressed by Gilgamesh's journey; he calls Gilgamesh a fool and urges him to call off his search. But Gilgamesh insists on hearing Utnapishtim's story.

Utnapishtim tells Gilgamesh of a time long before, when the people on earth made too much noise and annoyed the gods, and the gods decided to kill everyone. But the god Ea tipped off Utnapishtim, who built a boat and survived the flood. The flood was so fierce that it terrified even the gods, and Ea took that opportunity to suggest that (a) the gods think twice about doing anything like that again and (b) they make it up to Utnapishtim and his wife by making them immortal.

After the story, Utnapishtim's wife suggests that Gilgamesh try a simple experiment: staying awake for six days. Gilgamesh says, "No problem," and promptly falls asleep for six days. The point of this event isn't particularly clear. Perhaps it means that immortality is like never, ever sleeping, and Gilgamesh wouldn't like it if he got it. Or perhaps the point is that Gilgamesh isn't remotely capable of acquiring immortality and is just wasting his time looking.

When Gilgamesh wakes up, Mr. and Mrs. Utnapishtim take pity on him and tell him where he can find a plant called All-The-Old-Men-Are-Young-Again, which will enable him to live forever. Gilgamesh finds the plant, but as he takes (another) nap next to a river, a snake comes along and eats it.

Coming home

As Gilgamesh approaches his city, Uruk, he looks at its impressive walls, which he built, and realizes that he *will* have a kind of immortality: He built a city and a civilization that will survive him, and the story of his adventures will keep his name alive forever. And, so far, it has!

Hebrew Mythology: A is for Apple, B is for Babel

Probably the myths most familiar to people today are the myths of the ancient Hebrews, particularly the ones found in the book of Genesis in the Hebrew Bible (that's the Old Testament in the Christian Bible).

REMEMBER

Let us be really clear here about what we mean when we call the stories in Genesis "myths." We do *not* mean that they're lies, or irrelevant, or not to be taken seriously. We don't even mean that they aren't necessarily historically factual. Some stories are historically factual *and* mythological at the same time.

TIP

Think of the story of Paul Revere's ride through the suburbs of Boston. That story is historically factual, in its essence, but many of the well-known elements within the story are fictional. First of all, Revere worked together with William Dawes, who did his own "Midnight Ride," but doesn't make it into poems. Also, Revere almost certainly did not say, "The British are coming!", since he and everyone he was calling to, in Massachusetts in April of 1775, were British. (He likely said, "The Regulars are coming!") So the story is historical and it's a myth.

What makes myths different from other stories is that myths are true in a fundamentally meaningful way. We, Amy and Chris, think that to call something a "myth" is to *increase* its importance rather than to diminish it. Any old story can be factual, but only a few teach important truths. This chapter doesn't spend too much time on the myths of the Hebrews — just enough to show them in the context of all the other mythologies that were around them.

In the beginning

The Hebrew account of creation is very different from the Babylonian story (see the earlier section "*Enûma Elish:* The Babylonian Creation Story") or the Greek version Hesiod tells (see Chapter 3). According to the Hebrews, the gods aren't squabbling among themselves, eating their own children, or plotting against their parents. Only one god, who doesn't have a name other than God, exists and creates everything simply by speaking (well, almost everything).

In the beginning are only water and wind. God starts by making light and separating it from darkness. He then builds a solid dome to hold the water back (the sky) and makes dry land under the solid dome (the story of Noah and flood reveals that this dome has windows in it, and when the windows open up, the water pours through). Then he makes the plants and animals and finishes by creating human beings. All this action takes six days.

The creation of humans

After earth, water, sky, plants, and animals, God makes human beings in the form of a man and a woman. Genesis actually has two different accounts of God creating human beings; the two are not the same, but they sit happily side-by-side. Clearly both versions contained elements that the ancient Hebrews valued, and they remain in the Hebrew Bible and the Christian Old Testament to this day:

- In the first one, the god spends six days making everything, and he does all the creating merely by speaking. In the first version, two humans are created simultaneously, both a man and a woman.
- In the second account, he makes earth and heaven on one day. On that same day, before creating plants and animals, he makes a human being. But in this version, he doesn't make the human merely by saying "Let there be a human being." He gets down and molds the human out of dirt. In the second version, man comes first (see Figure 17-4), and then God creates a woman out of the man's rib.

TIP

The second version is very much like the Greek account, in which Prometheus molds humans out of mud.

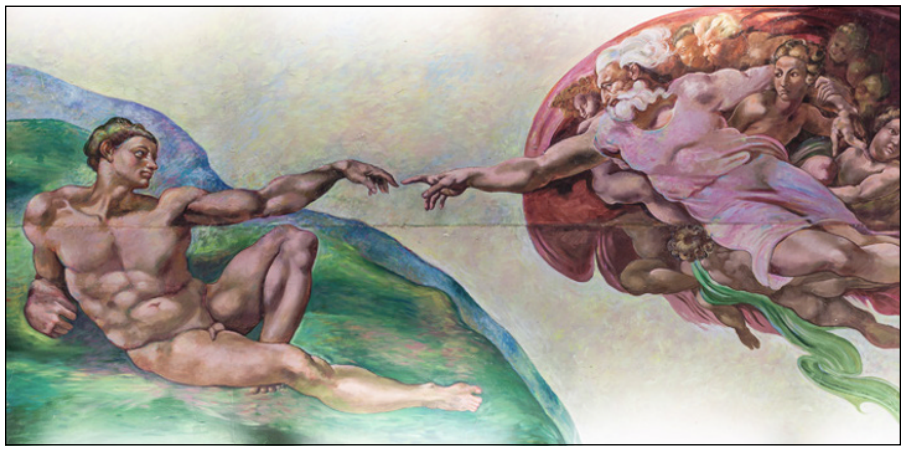

FIGURE 17-4: God creating Adam, as painted by Michelangelo.

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One apple and you're out of the garden

Just as Hesiod blamed all humanity's troubles on a woman (Pandora; see Chapter 3), so, too, did the ancient Hebrews. Eve, the first woman, is tempted by the serpent, who's the smartest ("the most subtle") of all the animals. Eve, by eating the fruit from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, causes people to

stop being immortal and to have to work for a living. But she also gives people moral judgment and makes them more like gods. That's why the immortality had to go — immortality plus moral judgment equals god, so humans can't have both at once.

Oh look, a flood myth

Every culture that existed anywhere near the Mediterranean Sea (and some in other places) seems to have had a story in which a great flood killed everyone but one couple. The story of Noah is the most famous, but the Mesopotamians told of Utnapishtim and his boat (see "Utnapishtim's flood story and advice" earlier in the chapter), and the Greeks and Romans knew of Deucalion and Pyrrha (see Chapter 3), who survived a world-ending flood. Because these stories are so similar on the surface, their differences are all the more interesting.

The flood story in Genesis, though similar to the one in Gilgamesh in its details, is different in its depiction of human beings and their relationship with divinity.

In the Hebrew story, God sees all the wickedness in the world and regrets having made human beings. He singles out Noah as the only one worth saving. So God comes to Noah and orders him to build a huge boat (an *ark*) and to stuff it with two examples of every living land animal, a male and a female. Noah gets started at once.

When the story gets to the building of the boat, all the instructions and details come from the mouth of God. The text says only that "Noah did what God told him." So the Hebrew version really focuses on God; Noah isn't much of a character, just an instrument of God's wishes.

WHERE'S ALL THE WATER COMING FROM?

So many ancient cultures have a version of the same flood-story — a universal flood that kills all humanity except one or two people, who become the ancestors of all the humans who follow — that people have always wondered if there is a historical event that gave rise to them all. Some have speculated that, as the Ice Ages passed, the melting water caused sea-levels to rise. This could have resulted in vast, unexpected floods. It is possible that the Indian Ocean suddenly broke through a bit of land called the Bab-el-Mandeb (between what is now Yemen and Eritreia), suddenly flooding the (once) dry valley that is now the Red Sea. Similarly, the Mediterranean may have abruptly flooded into a low-lying region to form the Black Sea. A comet striking the Indian Ocean or Mediterranean Sea could have caused sudden, violent flooding that would certainly have seemed to come from heaven. The jury is very much still out!

Noah finishes the project and loads the animals and his immediate family just as the rains begin. An interesting detail of the flood is that, in addition to the rain, "the fountains of the deep opened up. . . ." So the world gets flooded from two directions.

After 40 days, the rains stop, and 40 days later the ark comes to rest on the peak of Mt. Ararat, in what is now Turkey. Noah gets everyone and all the critters off the ark, and the world starts over.

The Tower of Babel and different languages

Of course, one common function of myths is to explain the origins of things, and the best example of this purpose in the Hebrew Bible is the story of the Tower of Babel.

Some generations after Noah, once the population of the earth has been built back up, organized civilization starts up again, too. At this time everyone speaks the same language, which makes sense since they are all direct descendants of Noah. Growing confident, the humans decide to build a brick tower tall enough to reach heaven. God notices and becomes angry that His creations would try to challenge him. Who knew what other ambitious project may be in the future?

So he issues a command, and all the people start speaking different languages. Unable to communicate, they abandon their construction project and go their separate ways.

REMEMBER

This story accounts for why humans speak so many different languages. And since it appears so early in the Hebrew Bible, the story is clearly important and fundamental. Perhaps its point is this: It is always the case, and has always been the case, that language is a tremendous barrier between people. Learning one foreign language is *hard*. No one can learn them all. So in myth and in history, language barriers have always been an obstacle to human achievement.

IN THIS CHAPTER

- Meeting the Egyptian deities
- Examining the place of religion in everyday life in Egypt
- Unwrapping the mysteries of the mummies and other fun bits of Egyptology

Chapter 18
Three Cheers for Egypt: Ra, Ra, Ra!

Egyptian civilization has been around for a very, very long time. The Egyptian dynasties got their start about 5,000 years ago, long before the rise of Greek civilization. And they held sway over the Nile region for thousands of years, creating a sophisticated civilization, an elaborate system of writing, a complex group of gods, and noteworthy burial practices.

In this chapter, we tell you about the Nile River and why it's so important for Egyptian history and mythology, the many gods and goddesses of ancient Egypt, the Divine Pharaohs, and of course mummies!

Write Me a Really Big River

The Nile was Egypt's defining feature. The entire Egyptian civilization existed within a few miles of the great river; all around was dry desert, but the Nile's banks were lush with plants and animals. Every year the Nile would overflow, flooding the land around it; and when the waters receded, the plants sprang up like magic. It was a relatively easy place to live (for those times, anyway) and thus was fertile ground for culture. Check out the map of Egypt in Figure 18-1.

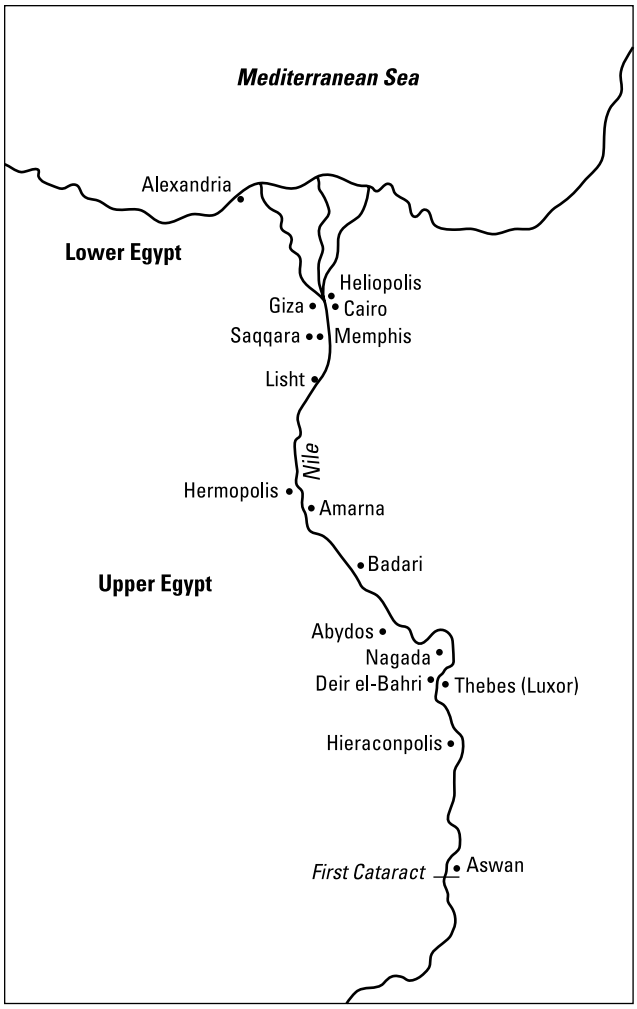

FIGURE 18-1: Ancient Egypt.

This endless cycle of destruction followed by fertility became the foundation of Egyptian religion. Creation was an ongoing cycle of renewal repeated every day, and the Egyptian people's job was to help the gods ward off destructive demons who may prevent the cycle from progressing as it should.

The Egyptians didn't have the same sort of mythology many of their neighbors across the Mediterranean Sea, such as the Greeks and Romans; deities were real entities, but they didn't engage in shenanigans like the immortals on Mount Olympus. A few stories about Egyptian gods survive today, but some of the best (such as the story of Isis and Horus) come from Greek writers. The Egyptians themselves didn't start writing down their myths until about 2000 BCE, after Egyptian civilization had already been around for a while.

THE TWO EGYPTS

Egypt was actually split into two Egypts, Upper Egypt and Lower Egypt. *Lower Egypt* was in the northern part of the country and encompassed Memphis and the Nile delta. *Upper Egypt* was much larger, extending all the way to Elephantine Island near Sudan. The important city of Luxor and the Valley of the Kings (home of many elaborate tombs) were there. North of that is where you'll find the huge pyramids, near where the Nile River starts to branch into many smaller streams that flow into the sea.

Lower Egypt was north of Upper Egypt; that can be confusing to cultures that traditionally put north above south on their maps by convention. Upper Egypt was at a higher altitude than Lower Egypt; the Nile flowed down from Upper Egypt into Lower Egypt and the Mediterranean Sea.

A Cavalcade of Creation Stories

REMEMBER

The Egyptians didn't have a single creation story. Instead, people in different parts of the country told different stories of how the world came into existence and of the creation of gods and people. We tell a few in the following sections.

Order from chaos: One version of how the world began

In the beginning was the *primordial* (ancient) water of creation. A mound rose out of it. Atum, the creator god, emerged from the water all alone. Apparently having nothing better to do, he masturbated. He caught his semen in his mouth and spat out two children: Shu, god of air, and Tefenet, goddess of moisture. These two went off to explore; Atum couldn't find them, so he sent another daughter, a fiery goddess also called Atum's divine Eye, to see whether she could find them. She brought them back, and Atum wept to have his children back safe. His tears turned into the first humans.

Shu and Tefenet had two children: Nut, the sky goddess, and Geb, the earth god. Nut and Geb fell in love and embraced one another so tightly no room existed between them. Nut got pregnant, but her children had no room to be born. Nut and Geb's father, Shu, separated them and held Nut high up over the earth (as you can see in Figure 18-2), which created room for living creatures and air for them to breathe. Water surrounded the earth and sky. Every night Nut swallowed the sun, and every morning she gave birth to it again.

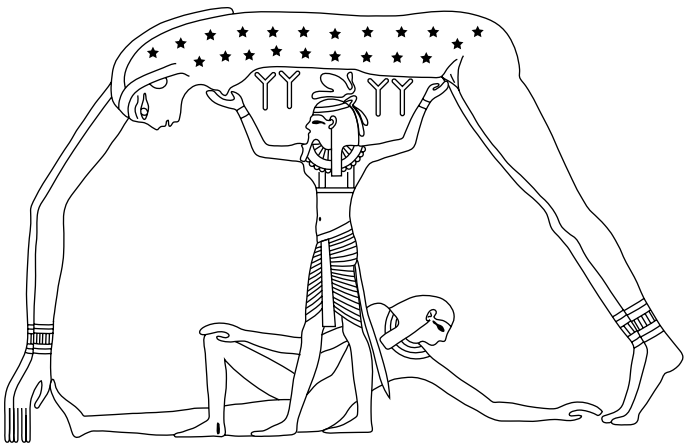

FIGURE 18-2: The air god, Shu, is separating the sky goddess, Nut, from the earth god, Geb.

Nut had two pairs of twins, Osiris and Isis and Seth and Nephthys. Osiris and Isis fell in love in the womb, but Nephthys (a girl) hated her brother Seth. Nevertheless, Nephthys became Seth's wife and Isis became Osiris's wife. As first-born male, Osiris was destined to rule Egypt, and he did for a short time.

Egyptian creator gods and their side of the story

The Egyptians also had four creator gods, each with his own *cult* (set of religious practices that people followed when worshipping a particular god). The story of the world's origin and the creation of humans came out differently for each of them.

A different take on Atum

The Atum worshipped at the city named Heliopolis is a snake that emerged from the primeval chaos (like Amon in the next section). Though he's usually depicted as human, he has both male and female attributes. He's sometimes called Ra-Atum and represents the evening sun who returns to Nut's womb. (You can find that story in the earlier section "Order from chaos: One version of how the world began.")

Amon-Ra fusion

Amon-Ra became a national god in the second millennium BCE, when the fertility god Amon, worshipped in the Egyptian city of Thebes, fused with the sun god Ra, whom we discuss later in the chapter. In his myth, Amon is the first being in existence. In one story, he takes the form of a goose and lays the cosmic egg from

which life comes. In another, he emerges from the primordial chaos in the form of a snake, just like Atum in the preceding section.

Khnum, sculptor of humans

Khnum had a cult on Elephantine Island. He controls the yearly rising of the Nile and its life-giving power. His sacred animal is the ram, and he's usually depicted as a man with a ram's head. Khnum is a potter; he made humans and animals out of clay and breathed life into their bodies.

Heavy-metal god Ptah

Ptah was worshipped at the city of Memphis (in Lower Egypt), where he was considered the god who existed at the beginning of time and created everything. (Check out the nearby sidebar "The two Egypts" for more on Lower and Upper Egypt.) He created all gods by thinking of them and speaking their names aloud. He fashioned gods and kings out of gold and other metals, which also gave him the position of the god of crafts.

Gods and Goddesses of the Sands

The ancient Egyptians had a huge number of deities. Some had more stories attached to them than others, but they were all fairly important. In addition to starring in the Egyptian creation stories (see the preceding sections), they were widely worshipped and give us some cool tales, especially the story of Horus and Seth.

Major players

In Egyptian mythology some gods and goddesses are simply more significant than the rest. They just seem to pop up at a greater frequency than the others. Here are a few of the biggies.

Ra, the sun god

Generally, the sun god is the main god of Egypt. He's born from Nut every day at dawn, grows up by noon, and is old by evening, when he goes to the underworld for the night before being born again the next morning. He takes the sun over the sky in a boat. Osiris and sky goddess Nut join him on his boat at night.

You can see one depiction of Ra in Figure 18-3. But the sun god took many forms; one of the most popular was a *dung beetle,* a creature that pushes round balls of dung around, imitating the sun's progress across the sky.

The Egyptians believed that the world would eventually end and that Ra himself could age. In one story, as Ra is getting older, people begin plotting against him, and he decides to punish them. He sends the goddess Sekhmet to kill them, but he stops her before they're all destroyed. But he feels so tired that he decides to retire. He appoints the god Osiris to be ruler over humanity (see the "Osiris, first among equals" section later in this chapter for more on this god).

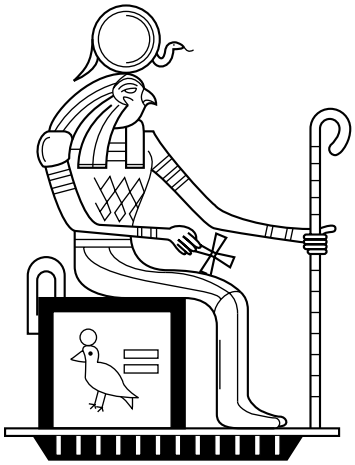

FIGURE 18-3: The sun god, Ra.

The sun god generally went by the name "Ra" (or "Re"), but this name was usually fused with another deity's name. For instance, the midday sun was called Ra-Harakhty, and the evening sun was Ra-Atum. Really, his name was secret. When Ra was getting old, Isis tricked him into revealing his secret name to her, but she promised to tell no one but Horus, so no one ever found out what it was.

Isis, a mover and a shaker

Isis is the wife and sister of Osiris and the mother of Horus. Egyptians worshipped her as the great mother goddess. She's one of Egypt's earliest goddesses.

TECHNICAL STUFF

Isis is mentioned in the Pyramid Texts, some of the earliest records of Egyptian religion (around 2465 to 2150 BCE).

Isis is a political mover. As Egypt passed from the rule of its native kings to the Ptolemies, Isis became the official goddess of the new state cult. She also traveled through the Greco-Roman world, becoming identified with the Greek goddesses Demeter, Selena, and Hera (see Chapter 5).

In one myth (that's extremely similar to a story about the Greek goddess Demeter from Chapter 5), Isis gets a job nursing a baby boy for a noblewoman. She takes a liking to the child and puts him in the fire every night to make him immortal. One night, the mother sees her doing so and screams. The baby dies, and Isis leaves.

Osiris, first among equals

As we note earlier in the chapter, Osiris is the brother and husband of Isis. He's the ruler of the underworld, and, incidentally, the first mummy. His jealous brother Seth murders him to take over his throne, and Isis mummifies him, after which point he goes to his new job with the dead.

Osiris is the god of agriculture and teaches people how to farm. The Egyptians compared his death and dismemberment with the annual harvest and cutting down of crops. His reanimation was the sign that crops would rise again the next year.

When Ra (whom we discuss earlier in the chapter) retires, he passes his throne to Osiris. Osiris has a brief reign as king of the earth, in charge of deities and everything else. He reigns with Isis at his side and presides over a golden age.

Seth, a stormy uncle

Seth is the brother of Isis and Osiris. He is usually depicted as having a human body and an animal's head. No one agrees on what kind of animal, so it is often called the "Seth Animal", but some think it looks like an aardvark. After murdering Osiris and having a lengthy disagreement with Isis and her son Horus, he finally accepts a job as the god of storms. (See the later section "Trouble in paradise: Horus and Seth" for the full story.) Seth lives in the desert. Egyptians depicted him as part wild donkey, part pig (or anteater).

Horus and his band of pharaohs

The son of Isis and Osiris, Horus is king of the gods and god of the sky, a position he has to fight his uncle Seth to acquire (see "Trouble in paradise: Horus and Seth" for that tale). He's depicted as a falcon. *Pharaohs,* the Egyptian kings, were considered earthly manifestations of Horus.

Other deities, national and local

Although some deities were worshipped throughout Egypt, others had a more local influence. Different localities had favorite deities they worshipped specially, resulting in a huge number of gods and goddesses all over the Egyptian land. Here are a few more, though certainly not all, Egyptian deities:

- **Thoth:** He's the moon god. He's depicted as a baboon, an *ibis* (a large wading bird), or a man. He's associated with secret magical powers, many of which were written down in the mythical Book of Thoth. (Thoth is kind of equivalent to Hermes in Greek mythology; read about him in Chapter 4.)
- **Anubis:** He has the head of a jackal. He receives the souls of dead people and leads them through the many trials the soul has to pass before reaching Osiris and paradise.
- **Hathor:** She's the goddess of lovers, fertility, and birth and also the wife of the sun god. She has the shape of a cow. (Isis also has cow like aspects; the cow was a common symbol for the life-giving female.) She nurses kings from her udder. Women wore *amulets* (charms) from her sanctuary to prevent prolonged labor. She is also the goddess of music and dance.
- **Sekhmet:** The "Powerful One," she's a lioness goddess. She kills rebellious humans for the sun god. Sometimes criminals were sacrificed to her.
- **Bastet:** The cat goddess, she's the patron of love, sex, and fertility. She started out as a lioness like Sekhmet but got milder as time went on and turned into a gentler pussycat.
- **Bes:** He's a fat dwarf with the mane and tail of a lion. His tongue sticks out of his mouth as a warning to enemies. He's the special helper for women in labor and safeguards young children. People put his image on furniture and wore him as amulets around their necks to ward off demons.
- **Selket:** The scorpion goddess, she's a guardian of the living and the dead.

Trouble in paradise: Horus and Seth

The gods Horus and Seth both think they should be king of the gods — Horus because he's the son of the former king Osiris and Seth because he's Osiris's brother and jealous that Osiris gets to be king. Both deities fight for the throne.

Assembly required, battery not needed

Seth, jealous of his brother Osiris, kills him, cuts him into pieces, and seizes the throne. Isis, distraught, gathers up the pieces of Osiris's body; she can't find his penis, so she makes one out of wood.

The Greek writer Plutarch said that a fish had eaten Osiris's penis, and he used this logic to explain why Egyptian priests didn't eat fish.

Then, with the help of the jackal god Anubis, Isis reassembles Osiris and holds everything together with mummy bandages. He comes back to life long enough to get her pregnant.

Isis is afraid Seth will kill her baby if he finds him, so she hides in the marshes of the Nile delta. There she bears her son, Horus, and raises him to avenge his father's murder and reclaim the throne. Seth tells all the dangerous elements in the marshes — the plants, animals, insects, and diseases — to harm Horus if they can. But Isis goes around and learns all their names, which gives her power over them and keeps Horus safe. She teaches Horus the names of all the dangerous beasts, and he grows up immune from harm by them.

Trials, contests, and mutilations

When Horus is grown, he and his mother go before a tribunal of gods to demand his throne. Seth argues that he's the only god strong enough to defend the sun-boat (see the earlier section "Ra, the sun god"), but Isis persuades the deities he's wrong. Seth refuses to continue the trial with Isis there, so the gods reconvene on an island. The ferryman isn't supposed to take Isis there, but she disguises herself, bribes the ferryman, and manages to get over to the island. Then she turns into a beautiful woman and complains to Seth that she's a widow and a stranger has stolen all her cattle, robbing her son of his inheritance. Seth agrees that this act is a crime; Isis uses this statement as evidence he's incriminated himself.

Seth still refuses to relinquish the throne and challenges Horus to a contest: They'll each turn into a hippopotamus and stay under water for three months. Horus agrees, but Isis is worried he may lose. So she throws a harpoon at Seth (though she hits Horus first). Horus gets really angry at his mom; he cuts off her head and runs into the desert with it. Isis turns herself into a statue and returns to the gods; the god Thoth fixes her up with a cow's head as a replacement for the one Horus took.

The sun god punishes Horus for hurting his mother by letting Seth tear out his eyes. The goddess Hathor restores them with a judicious application of gazelle milk.

The pen is mightier than the harpoon

Horus appeals to the gods again. They write a letter to Osiris asking what to do. Osiris responds that he'll send demons to plague the gods if they don't give Horus the throne. Horus becomes king, Isis rejoices, and Seth gets a new home and a new job: He goes to live with the sun god in his new position as god of storms.

Religion in Egyptian Life

Religion was very important to the ancient Egyptians. Everyone from the kings to the lowest walks of life had to observe all the proper rituals, or the chaotic demons would wreak havoc over the land.

Pharaohs: Church and state

REMEMBER

In Egypt, religion was a state matter. Egyptian kings, called *pharaohs,* were believed to be descendants of the deities Isis and Osiris, which made them divine. The pharaoh was considered a manifestation of the sky god, Horus. We cover Isis, Osiris, and Horus earlier in the chapter.

Kings and their agents the priests served the deities in their temples. These temples were huge and grand to reflect the hugeness and grandeur of all of creation. The gods resided in these temples, and priests took care of them, bathing and dressing their statues and laying out feasts for them to eat. Temples weren't like modern churches — most people never set foot in them — but more like machines to keep the cycle of the world in motion.

Pyramids: Houses of eternity

Like all other Egyptians, pharaohs wanted to be reborn after their deaths. And like everyone else, they had to prepare for the trip to the land of the dead. But kings could spend huge amounts of community money and mobilize thousands of workers to help them out, and that's where pyramids come from.

REMEMBER

Pyramids were tombs for kings. People have suggested that they were used as astronomical observatories, sundials, or for talking to extraterrestrials, but the archaeological evidence says that pyramids were just tombs.

Egypt has over 90 pyramids, ranging from the delta to the first cataract of the Nile. (In this context, *cataracts* are similar to whitewater rapids.) Egyptians saw the pyramids as a symbolic representation of the mound of creation that appeared out of the primordial chaos at the beginning of the world. A king entombed in a pyramid went through the death-rebirth cycle and was reunited with the gods every day. Priests and other supporters performed rituals and made offerings to make sure the pharaoh had a good afterlife. The tombs themselves were full of treasure and offerings of (formerly) living creatures, such as wives, servants, and pets.

Death and the afterlife

The Egyptians took death seriously. They built elaborate tombs to protect their spirits after death, preserved their bodies so that they'd remain intact, and communicated with ancestors. They all hoped to be reborn after death to spend time with the gods Ra and Osiris.

The dead had direct access to the gods and could intervene on behalf of their relatives, so people would set up household shrines to their ancestors and make offerings to them. They'd write letters to their ancestors asking for help on all manner of problems — marital problems, legal difficulties, and requests for children. Sometimes they just wrote to say "hi."

At times, people would become convinced their dead relatives were making trouble for them. For instance, a man in 1200 BCE was certain his bad luck was the doing of his dead wife. He wrote her a letter reminding her what a good husband he'd been and insisting that it wasn't his fault she'd died while he was away on business.

At night when people slept, they visited the world of the dead in their dreams. Of course, knowing what to make of dreams is hard, so some people established themselves as expert dream interpreters.

TIP

The interpretations were a lot like modern horoscopes — vague enough so that people could see whatever they wanted in them.

Mummies and rebirth

All Egyptians wanted to be reborn after they died, and mummification was an important part of this process. Without a physical body, a dead person's spirit would go hungry and be unable to find peace in the afterlife. Before a body was embalmed, people considered it an empty shell; after mummification and a funeral, the dead person would be "reanimated" and could partake of offerings from their family.

The Book of the Dead

The trip to Osiris, king of the dead, was perilous. Monsters and traps lurked all along the way. A famous Egyptian document, *The Book of the Dead,* told people what they had to do to run the gauntlet and reach Ra's sun-boat and the *Field of Reeds,* the Egyptian version of heaven.

The way to Osiris had several gates. The Egyptians imagined they'd encounter rivers, islands, deserts, and lakes of fire. Wealthy people had spells inscribed onto their coffins to help them through all this stuff.

MAKING MUMMIES

Some of the earliest mummies formed when bodies buried shallowly in the desert sand dried out before they rotted. But this method wasn't reliable, so the Egyptians worked out some more elaborate techniques. Mummification came in several forms, some more complicated and expensive than others. Basically, the embalmer would lay out the body, remove the brain through the nose with an iron hook, and pull the internal organs out through an incision in the body's side. The organs went into special containers that were protected by the gods. The embalmer packed the body with *natron* (a kind of salt) to dry it out. After 40 days or so, the embalmer removed the natron, washed the body, coated it with oils and resins, and wrapped it in several hundred yards of linen.

After a person got to Osiris, they had to declare themselves innocent or guilty of various crimes. Anubis led the person to a set of scales and weighed their heart on it. The counterweight was a feather from the goddess of truth. If the heart weighed more than the feather, the person was obviously guilty, and a female monster called the Devourer of the Dead would summarily eat them. Figure 18-4 shows this scene. Anyone who passed the test got to move among the gods or even ride in the sun-boat.

FIGURE 18-4: Anubis weighing a soul.

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IN THIS CHAPTER

- Perusing Phoenician myths
- Breaking down some Berber ideas
- Highlighting Hausa practices and stories

Chapter 19

North African Mythology: A Real Melting Pot

The mythologies of North Africa were varied and complicated and had a lot in common with myths elsewhere. That's not surprising considering that the northern lands of Africa were constantly in touch with other cultures. Egypt (see Chapter 18) is in northeast Africa, of course, and the Greeks and Romans (see Parts 2 and 3) were right across the Mediterranean Sea to the north. Plus, the northern coast of Africa was constantly settled and resettled by people from far away. Then, to the south across the Sahara Desert were the kingdoms of the Bantu (which we cover in Chapter 16).

In this chapter we introduce you to the Phoenicians, who really got around and liked bees. You meet the Berber people, who were in contact with the ancient Greeks, Romans, and ancient Egyptians; they were big into making mummies and may have learned the skill from the Egyptians. The Berbers give us the story of the giant Antaeus. This chapter also tells you about the Hausa people, who came to Africa from what is now Iraq, with their spiritual force called Bòòríí. Finally, we tell you the story of Amina, the woman king who led her people to great victories in battle.

Honey, I Brought the Bees: Phoenician Mythology

The *Phoenician* people — or "Punic" people, as the Romans called them — settled in northern Africa, Libya, and Tunisia, having come over from what's now Lebanon. Scholars think they were descendants of the Canaanites mentioned in the Jewish and Christian scriptures. They were rich and powerful until the Romans conquered them in the 300s and 200s BCE. But their religion and mythology survived on for centuries afterward.

Phoenician deities and heroes

Baal Hammon and Tanit were the king and queen of the gods for the Phoenician peoples. Baal Hammon (see Figure 19-1) is a weather god who looks like an old man with curling horns. Tanit is a goddess of both fertility and war; appropriately, in art she often appears nude but also carrying the head of a lion that she's killed. For centuries, people said that the Phoenician people sacrificed children to these bloodthirsty gods. Then, for about a century scholars said that idea was nonsense, spread by the Romans and other enemies of the Phoenicians. But archaeologists have more recently discovered massive graves with the bones of sacrificed animals and children, so the stories may have some basis.

FIGURE 19-1: Baal Hammon.

Because the Phoenician people were so closely in contact with Egyptians (Chapter 18), Greeks (chapters 4, 5, and 6), and Romans (Chapter 9), their gods kind of merged with the gods of their neighbors, friends, and enemies. For example,

- The Phoenician god Baal Hammon is kind of like a sky-god and ancestor of other gods. His role is similar to that of the Greek Cronus and Roman Saturn.
- The goddess Tanit is the Queen of the gods, like the Greek Hera and Roman Juno.
- The goddess Astarte is a goddess of love, fulfilling a role similar to that of Aphrodite (Greek) or Venus (Roman).
- The hero/god Melqart is a mortal whose heroic exploits elevated him to the status of god, which sounds a lot like Heracles.

A passion for beekeeping

Phoenician mythology tells of the mythical figure Gargoris, ancestor of Habis, the first king who ruled the Cynetes people of Tartessos.

TECHNICAL STUFF

Tartessos is technically in Europe, in southern Spain, but because this myth is Phoenician, we put it in this chapter.

Gargoris is said to be the inventor of beekeeping and thus the culture hero who brought the gift of honey to human beings. A *culture hero* is a mythological figure who gives human beings some agricultural or technological gift. Gargoris, according to the Phoenicians, taught people how to keep bees for honey.

TIP

Other examples of culture heroes: Prometheus, according to the Greeks, taught human beings how to make and control fire. Johnny Appleseed of North American legend, and eventually, mythology (as we explain in Chapter 1) brought apples and their cultivation to the American frontier.

Beekeeping has its (obvious) risks, though. Gargoris's daughter got stung by one of his bees and began to die. The king rushed to her aid and sucked the venom out of the sting. This act was very much like a kiss, and one thing led to another; the result was the birth of a baby. Gargoris was both the grandfather and father of this baby.

Because the baby was the result of incest, Gargoris ordered he be abandoned in the countryside. But a family of deer found and raised the baby, who actually came to look like a deer thanks to his upbringing. Eventually, he returned to human civilization and successfully claimed to be the king of Tartessos. He was named *Habis*, which is "Deer" in the Phoenician language.

This story is one of a very few known from Phoenician mythology, and then only barely. A Roman writer named Gnaeus Pompeius Trogus, who was mainly interested in the story of Alexander the Great, is the one who put it to paper (well, papyrus). Trogus's work doesn't even survive anymore; all that exists is a summary (or *epitome*) of his work by another Roman author named Justin. But the story history of Habis, Phoenician king of Tartessos, was compelling enough to survive to the present day.

Love for a Mummy and a Mommy: Berber Beliefs

The Berbers, also called the Amazigh people, were the inhabitants of northern Africa after Phoenician civilization faded away. (You can read about the Phoenicians in the earlier section "Honey, I Brought the Bees: Phoenician Mythology.") Like their predecessors, the Berbers were in constant contact with Greeks and Romans, pagan religions, Judaism, and Christianity for centuries before finally converting to Islam. Pre-Islamic Berber mythology is a little hard to pin down, but we offer a few tidbits in the following sections.

Connecting with ancestors

The Berbers worshiped the dead, especially their own dead ancestors and dead kings. They actually mummified their dead, like the Egyptians did, and commonly slept in their ancestors' tombs, hoping to get answers to their questions about life-decisions (whom to marry, how to deal with the kids, whether to start a business) in their dreams.

Who learned the art of mummification from whom is hard to say, but a mummy found in Libya was 5,500 years old — far older than any known Egyptian mummy. Sadly, no ancient copies of *Mummies For Dummies* exist to settle the issue.

The ancient Berber kingdom of Numidia was famous for the richness and glory of its royal tombs, which were tourist attractions in antiquity. A particularly famous royal tomb at Msoura, in modern Morocco, features a burial mound (or *tumulus*) surrounded by a ring of huge stones, some over 15 feet tall.

Keeping in touch with Mom

REMEMBER

The most famous myth to come from the Berbers is the story of Antaeus. He's the son the Earth goddess and gained strength and invincibility from her as long as he was in contact with her.

Antaeus didn't use this power for good, apparently. Instead, he challenged everyone who came by his house to a wrestling match. The losers died (and since everyone he challenged lost, everyone he challenged died). Antaeus built a temple out of the skulls of his wrestling victims. But then a figure out of Greek mythology wandered into his story and put an end to it.

Heracles, having finished 10 out of the 12 Labors we describe in Chapter 6, passed by Antaeus's house on his way to collect the apples of the Hesperides. The men started wrestling, and Heracles was astonished that he was losing to this guy! But, always clever, Heracles realized Antaeus was getting strength from the Earth, so he picked him up, breaking the connection, and crushed him to death in a mighty bear hug. This epic wrestling match (shown in Figure 19-2) was a popular subject for artists in the Renaissance.

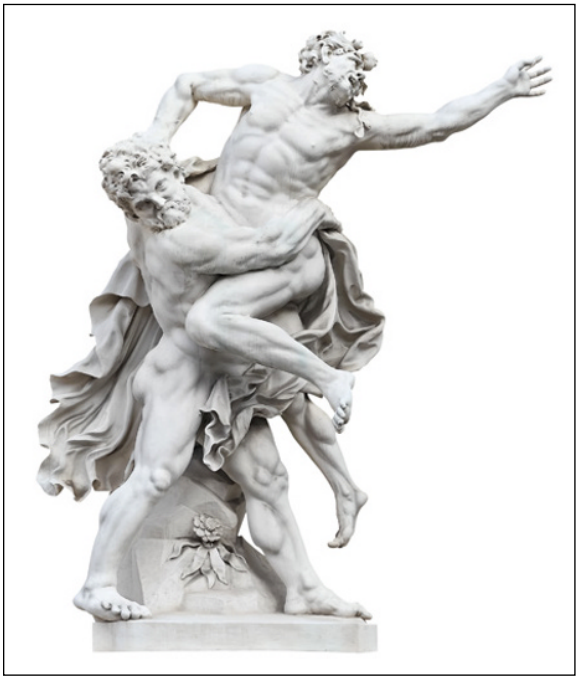

FIGURE 19-2: Heracles and Antaeus.

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Desert Spirits: The Hausa People

The Hausa people live on both sides of the Sahara Desert, from the eastern coast to the western coast of Africa. Because for many centuries they controlled trade and pilgrimages across the vast desert, they were in contact with many other cultures but retained their own religion and traditions.

The magic of Bòòríí

Central to Hausa religion, and therefore mythology, is the idea of Bòòríí, a spiritual force that inhabits all physical things. The religious practices associated with Bòòríí are called *Bori* and consist of rituals, songs, spells, and dances, all designed to control these spirits, help things grow, or heal the sick.

Bori was mainly in the hands of women, groups of priestesses lead by a royal priestess called Inna, which means "Mother of Us All." These priestesses kept the spirits under control, managing them so they were more helpful than harmful. Bori mostly died out when the people of the region converted to Islam, but not entirely. Local versions of Islam in Mali and Chad contain some rituals that survive from the more ancient Bori practices.

The founding of the Hausa people

The Hausa preserve a mythology of their ancient kingdoms, stories that are rooted in historical fact but have added mythological elements.

According to mythology, the Hausa people were founded by the hero Bayajidda, who was the son of King Abdullahi of Baghdad (the capital city of Iraq). An invading army led by a certain Queen Zidam captured Baghdad, and Bayajidda fled to Africa.

There, he came to the city of Borno, where he married Magaram, the daughter of the king. After a while, the king became jealous of his son-in-law Bayajidda's popularity, so Bayajidda and his new bride had to escape from Borno and the jealous king.

He came to the city of Gaya (in modern Niger). There, the local blacksmiths made him a knife as a present. He went on his way and ended up in Daura (in modern Nigeria). He was really thirsty from all this wandering, so he asked an old woman for some water. She said that everyone was thirsty because a terrible, monstrous snake was guarding the only well, and no one could draw water to drink. So Bayajidda took his shiny new knife, killed the snake, and put its head in a bag.

The next day, the people of the city saw that the snake was dead and that their well was back in business. The queen, Magajiya Daurama, said that she'd marry whoever could prove he had killed the snake and that he'd become king. Various guys claimed to have done the deed, but only Bayajidda was convincing because, you know, he had the snake's head in a bag.

Magajiya Daurama and Bayajidda married (it's not clear whether the Queen becomes his second wife, in addition to Magaram, or whether she replaces Magaram), and their children became the founders of the various branches of the Hausa people.

The Woman King

Hausa mythology also celebrates Queen Amina, sometimes called Aminatu. She ruled Zazzau, in what's now Nigeria, for 34 years. Her mother was queen before her. Starting when she was a little kid, her grandfather trained her in all the military arts, one-on-one fighting, and how to lead an army.

The 2022 film *The Woman King* is set in Africa and based on African history, but that's a different story. The film is about a woman warrior named Nanisca who becomes king of the West African nation of Dahomey in the early 1800s.

When she became queen, she launched a series of military campaigns to expand the power of Zazzau. Her army of 30,000 soldiers was said to be invincible. The epic poems about her reign call her "Amina daughter of Nikatau, a woman as capable as a man that was able to lead men to war."

According to Hausa mythology, Amina had a darker side. Supposedly, she took a new lover in every city she came to and would have his head cut off after sleeping with him for one night.

IN THIS CHAPTER

- Fighting the classic battle of Good versus Evil: Zoroastrianism
- Telling 1,001 tales to save lives
- Going on adventures with Sinbad, Aladdin, and Ali Baba

Chapter 20
One Thousand Tales: Persian Mythology

Persian civilization has enjoyed an immensely long history, from being a true world power in the sixth century BCE through getting conquered by Alexander the Great to being the center of medicine and higher education in the 900s CE to becoming the grounds for the modern nation-state of Iran.

Persia sits between the Arabic world and India (with the rest of Asia off to the East). Persians aren't ethnically Arabs, and the Persian language — now called "Farsi" by some, but not all, Iranians — isn't Arabic. But the stories that make up Persian mythology are often set in the Arab world (when they aren't set in China). To make things even more complicated, aristocratic Englishmen discovered the literature and mythology of Persia in the 1700s CE, so a lot of the stories come down to today from fancy Englishmen with names like "Lord Something." Truly a broad-reaching and inclusive mythology!

In this chapter we explore the Zoroastrian religion and how it shaped mythology and jump right into the most famous body of Persian myths: the 1,001 tales that the woman Scheherazade is said to have told, night by night, to save her life. Her tales include the stories of Sinbad, Aladdin, and Ali-Baba.

You Gotta Take Sides: Zoroastrian Mythology

For much of ancient history, the Persian people followed the teachings of a mysterious prophet named Zoroaster. This man lived, perhaps, in the 700s BCE. Followers of Zoroaster saw the whole universe, and particularly the people in it, involved in an epic battle between Good and Evil.

TECHNICAL STUFF

- Good is the side of the god Ahura Mazda. He created life and good things by using a force called *Asha* (which may be the basis for the idea of the Force in the *Star Wars* films).

  The Japanese automotive company Mazda was also inspired by Zoroastrian mythology.

- The evil, destructive force is *Avestan,* whose master is Ahriman. He's the "bad god," the opponent of Ahura Maza.

These two sides fight it out, and the Zoroastrian Persians knew that if they were winning wars and gaining power, the Good Side was winning. One side effect of this worldview was that the Persian Empire at its height was pretty tolerant of other religions; the Good Side was winning, after all, so why worry? When the Persians defeated the Babylonians, for example, they told the Israelites they could go back to Israel and return to practicing their religion.

In mythology, the Ahura Mazda is sometimes helped by *Peris.* These winged women, like angels, were kicked out of Paradise for sinning but then became an army of the Good Side. They fight the *Divs,* nasty little devils who like to capture Peris and put them in iron cages. Sometimes the Peris act as messengers to human beings — again, very much like the angels in the Hebrew and Christian Bibles.

The Persian epic poem *Shahnameh,* or "Book of Kings," tells the story of the long wars between Ahura Mazda and Ahriman, the Peris and Divs, and human kings, starting with Keyumars, the first "Shah of the World."

The (Almost) Never-Ending Story: 1,000 Tales

The most famous myths to come out of Persia are based on a book called *Hezār Afsān* ("1,000 Tales"). What culture "owns" these stories is hard to know because they probably came from India first and then moved into Persia and eventually

ended up in Arabic under the name *Alf Laylah wa-Laylah* ("1,001 Nights"). After they were in Arabic, they spread throughout the Middle East and Africa and all the way to Spain. English-speakers first encountered these stories as "The Arabian Nights Entertainment" and then later as "1,001 Arabian Nights."

TECHNICAL STUFF

Persia/Iran has always been right between the Middle East and the rest of Asia, next to India; at times, the Persian Empire included Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey and Iraq (on one side) and Afghanistan and parts of Pakistan and India on the other. It had seaports on the Persian Gulf, the Indian Ocean, and the Mediterranean Sea. So the idea that Persian mythology may include stories from all over the place, and may send its own stories all over the place, is no surprise.

Oh, and whether in Persian, Arabic, or English, a lot of the action of these myths happens in India or China. It may be that, for the Persians, "China" just meant something like "once upon a time in a far-off kingdom."

One thousand and one different versions: The legacy

Regardless of the title, the country, or the language, everyone loves these stories. They show up in picture books, in live-action and animated films, in a Bugs Bunny cartoon or two, and on the Broadway stage. And that may seem strange, because the stories are pretty sexy and very, very violent. But people seem to like that stuff!

These stories have always been super popular. English-readers can find many, many different versions — lots of which you can download for free because they're out of copyright.

TIP

If you want to read more of these tales, do look at different translations. Some are *bowdlerized* — that is, edited according to the tastes of different times. In Victorian England, for example, people liked translations that removed a lot of the sex. Some versions may treat the Persian and Arabic (and Indian and "Chinese") cultural elements in ways that are out of date.

The "framework story": The story that sets up all the others

A lot of the *1,000 Tales* involve brave, clever, and (of course) beautiful women, starting with the "Framework Narrative," which wraps up all the other stories. This story is that of Scheherazade, a young woman in the court of King Shahryār, the "king of India and China." (This king has no historical basis, by the way!)

Shahryār discovers that his brother's wife cheated on her husband and then that his own wife cheated on him. King and brother are the subject of jokes, and *that* won't do! So Shahryār decides that the best way to (a) stay married all the time and (b) not get cheated on is to marry a young virgin and have her killed the morning after the wedding, before she has a chance to cheat.

He does this for a while, to the growing horror of everyone in the palace. Particularly horrified is the vizier, the palace official whose job is to find all these virgins. Recruitment is getting difficult! He fears for his own life, but his daughter, Scheherazade, says, "I got this."

Scheherazade keeps 'em coming back: Talking to stay alive

Scheherazade marries the king and, on their wedding night, starts telling a story without revealing the end. The king is dying to know what happens, so he gives her a one-day extension on her life. And she does it again and again, for 1,001 nights (two years and nine months, if you're counting).

Different versions of the tale have different explanations of how Scheherazade eventually guarantees her life. The one we like goes like this: Two years and nine months is enough time for Scheherazade to bear the king several children; also, because she's with him *every one of those nights,* he can be reasonably confident that she isn't cheating on him. Also, he probably comes to like her! So her life is spared, and the world has a terrific set of stories.

The Stories within the Stories within the Story

"One Thousand Tales" is basically a vast epic and includes magical tales, historical tales, and erotic tales (smart Scheherazade!). Sometimes she has the characters in a story start telling a long story, for double the life-saving suspense! We can't tell them all here, but we can summarize the three most famous to give you an idea: Sinbad the Sailor, Aladdin, and Ali Baba.

From Baghdad to Batavia, on, in, and under the sea: Sinbad the Sailor

Starting on the 548th night of Scheherazade's storytelling, she starts the story of Sinbad the Sailor and his Seven Voyages. This one has a framework story within a

framework story: In Baghdad (now Iraq), a poor *porter* (guy who carries luggage to and from ships) takes a break outside a rich man's house. He prays to Allah asking why a rich man lives in luxury while he works hard and never gets ahead; he prays aloud, and the rich man comes out to talk to him. It turns out both the porter and the rich man are named Sinbad!

The rich man, Sinbad the Sailor, then tells Sinbad the Porter the tales of the seven sea voyages that made him a rich man. The point is, clearly, "It wasn't easy to get rich; you have no idea!"

Sinbad's seven voyages took him from Basra (the city on the Persian Gulf in what's now Iraq) all along the east of Africa, through the Indian Ocean to "Ceylon" (now Sri Lanka), and into the Java Sea and Jakarta (which is in Indonesia but used to be called Batavia). His voyages, as he tells them, also took him to islands with monsters like the Cyclops in the Greek *Odyssey* (see Chapter 7). Sinbad has to blind this monster, too, in order to escape. One island turned out to be a huge sleeping whale; when Sinbad and his crew lit a fire, the whale woke up and submerged.

And again and again, Sinbad was the sole survivor of a shipwreck but somehow made a fortune in treasure on voyage after voyage.

TIP

The adventures of Sinbad aren't hard to find. They've been made into at least 40 movies, going back to 1936 (including one with Popeye the Sailor in the role of Sinbad the Sailor), in English, Arabic, Turkish, Italian, French, Hindi, Chinese, and Japanese.

The great Persian genie-off: Aladdin, his lamp, and the genie

Thanks to Disney and the genius of Robin Williams, the story of Aladdin is probably the most familiar of all Scheherazade's stories.

TECHNICAL STUFF

The story of Aladdin may have come from a Syrian storyteller named Hanna Diyab in the 1700s and been added to the "1,000 Tales" later, but we're including it here just to be tidy.

Aladdin is set in "China," which probably just means "a long way from here!" This version of "China" looks a lot like Persia or the Middle East. It's ruled by a sultan, for one thing.

Aladdin is a poor boy, living with his mother. An evil sorcerer recruits the boy to fetch a lamp out of a magic cave. He doesn't give Aladdin a lot of details, just a magic ring that will help him get past the booby traps. Aladdin enters the cave,

makes it past the traps, and finds the old, tarnished oil-lamp (see Figure 20-1). As he comes back out of the cave, the sorcerer tries to snatch the lamp and lock him in the cave. Aladdin gets away but is locked in the cave (still holding the lamp).

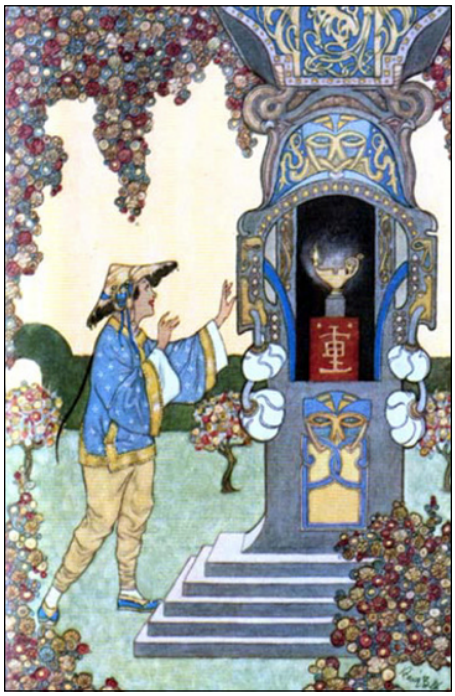

FIGURE 20-1: Aladdin finds a lamp.

Wikipedia

Trapped in the dark, trying to figure out what to do, he rubs his hands together. This move activates the magic ring, and a genie comes out and helps him escape the cave. He makes it home to his mom with both the ring and the lamp.

His mom wants to sell the ugly lamp for a little money. But when Aladdin tries to polish it up, a (more powerful) genie emerges and offers wishes. Aladdin wishes for wealth for himself and his mom and shortly ends up living in a huge mansion and marrying the sultan's daughter, Badroulbadour. (He does something clever to block the already-arranged marriage between the princess and the son of the sultan's vizier.)

The sorcerer isn't out of the picture, though! He dresses up like a merchant and comes to the mansion. He offers to "trade new lamps for old lamps!" The princess doesn't know the secret of the lamp, so she hands it over, thinking she got a good deal.

The sorcerer has the genie (now under his control) transport Aladdin's mansion all the way from "China" to Maghreb in northwest Africa. Aladdin still has the magic ring, and although the genie-of-the-ring can't defeat the genie-of-the-lamp, it can help Aladdin and his wife travel to Maghreb to try to get their mansion back.

As in so many of Scheherazade's stories, the hero gets bailed out by a clever woman. In this case, the princess seduces the sorcerer, steals the lamp back, kills the sorcerer, and gets their palace returned to "China." The sorcerer's equally evil brother makes one last attempt to kill Aladdin and steal his magic lamp, but Badroulbadour and Aladdin foil that plot, too. Finally, Aladdin becomes sultan when his father-in-law dies.

The story of Aladdin was first performed on stage in London in 1788. The first film version of it was in 1926, *The Adventures of Prince Achmed* (the oldest animated film that survives!).

Open, sesame! Ali-Baba, some thieves, and the clever Morgiana

The story "Ali Baba and the 40 Thieves" is complex and very violent! It also answers the question "How can a hero luck into a lot of money without stealing it?" The answer: "Let him steal it from thieves!"

Ali Baba and his brother Cassim (or "Kassim") are the sons of a wealthy merchant, but when Dad dies, Cassim tricks Ali Baba out of his inheritance, takes over the family business, and marries a rich wife. Ali Baba takes a job cutting up firewood in the forest and marries a poor (but good!) wife.

A lucky find

One day, Ali Baba is working in the forest when 40 thieves come riding by, up to the face of a cliff. He hears the leader say, "Open, sesame!," and a hidden cave opens up. The thieves ride into the cave. Later, they come out, and the leader closes the hidden entrance with "Close, sesame!" After they've ridden away, Ali Baba repeats the magic words and enters the cave. It's full the thieves' stolen treasure!

Why "Open, sesame"? No one really knows. Maybe it's because the ancient Babylonians used sesame seed oil in magical rituals. Maybe it's because sesame seeds grow in pods that open themselves up when they're ripe. Maybe it's from the Hebrew *shemshamayim,* which would mean "Open in the name of heaven!" But "sesame" is in all the versions of the story from Persian to French to English. And

Cassim, when he forgets the magic formula (see the following section), tries the names of other seeds and oils.

Ali Baba takes a single bag of gold coins, closes the cave, and goes home. It must have been a pretty big bag, though, because instead of counting the coins, he and his wife decide to weigh them. They're so poor that they never have enough of anything to be worth weighing, so the wife goes over to Cassim's house to borrow a scale and a measuring cup.

Cassim's wife is curious; what does Ali Baba suddenly have enough of to require weighing and measuring? So she puts a little sticky stuff — wax? sheep fat? honey? — in the bottom of the cup to see what sticks to it. She's probably expecting peas or seeds or something like that.

But when Ali Baba and his wife return the scale and cup, Cassim and his wife see a gold coin is stuck to the bottom of the cup. The greedy Cassim can't let this development alone, so he badgers his brother until he gets the whole story. Without consulting Ali Baba, Cassim grabs some donkeys and heads to the forest to take as much treasure as he can.

Cassim needs a password manager

Cassim makes it into the cave with no problem (see Figure 20-2). But confronted with a vast treasure, his naked greed drives the password right out of his mind. He tries "Open, olive oil!", "Open, fennel!", and various other botanical guesses.

TIP

Fans of Tolkien may think this story reminds them of Gandalf at the Gates of Moria, trying to remember or guess the Elvish password. This connection is no accident: "Mountain opens to magic words" is an element of myth and storytelling from all cultures.

Cassim never gets it right, and when the thieves return they catch him and kill him.

A secret mission for a tailor

After several days, when Cassim doesn't return from the forest, Ali Baba (a better brother than Cassim deserves) goes looking for him. When he gets to the cave, he sees that the thieves have not only killed Cassim but also cut his body into four pieces (a charming process called *quartering*) and nailed them up over the door of the cave as a warning. Ali Baba brings his brother's body, in pieces, back home.

Now they've got a problem: how to bury Cassim without inviting a lot of questions? Morgiana, a slave in Cassim's house, proposes a solution.

FIGURE 20-2: Ali Baba's brother, Cassim, in the thieves' cave.

Wikipedia

First, she goes to a drugstore to buy medicine, explaining that Cassim is really sick. This act sets up an explanation for his death. Then, during the night, she visits Baba Mustafa, a tailor in town, and offers him a special job. For a handsome fee, he agrees to be blindfolded, led through the streets, and set to sewing together Cassim's body. He does, and the family can bury Cassim in one piece, without a lot of rumor and gossip. Ali Baba and his wife move into Cassim's much nicer house and take over the business.

Meanwhile, the thieves see that someone has removed their gruesome corpse-warning, and the chief thief sends one of his guys into town to poke around. This agent happens to meet Baba Mustafa, who mentions that he'd gotten a strange job sewing a body back together. But he doesn't know where the job was! The thief has the idea to blindfold Baba Mustafa again and have him reproduce the twists and turns until he comes to Ali Baba's house.

Morgiana shows her value again

The thief plans to come back to the house with all his guys, so he puts a chalk mark on the door and goes off to get them. Morgiana, always thinking, notices the mark and puts an identical mark on every house on the street. Foiled! When the

leader of the thieves sees how his guy has failed, he kills him. Down to 39 thieves! A second thief fails in pretty much the same way, foiled by Morgiana, and he gets killed by his boss, too. Current thief population: 38 thieves.

The leader of the thieves redoes the blind walk with Baba Mustafa the tailor, but this time he just takes a good, hard look at the house so he'll remember it. He comes back with all his 37 thieves and a plan to murder everyone in the house.

Now it gets gruesome. The thieves turn up at Ali Baba's house. Their leader is pretending to be a travelling oil merchant looking for hospitality for the night. He has camels (or donkeys) loaded with 38 large jars. One of the jars contains fine olive oil. Each of the others contains a thief. The plan is for Ali Baba to let the camels into the courtyard for the night and for the thieves to come out of their jars and kill everyone. (Kind of like the Trojan Horse in Chapter 7.)

Morgiana once again saves the day (or night), first by luck and then by ruthless action. Going out to sample the oil brought by the "merchant" to see whether they should buy some for the house, she opens the wrong jar and sees a guy in there. Thinking fast, she whispers, "Quiet! Not yet!" She then finds the jar of oil, heats it up to boiling, and pours its contents into each of the 37 jars containing thieves. (How this marination didn't result in a very great deal of screaming isn't clear.)

One last dance

When the leader of the thieves (because the story is now "Ali Baba and Just One Thief") discovers what's happened to his men, he flees the house and lies low for a while. He takes his time on his next (and last) plan.

He pretends to be a merchant and sets up business in town. He befriends Ali Baba's son, who's running the family business. The son invites his new buddy to dinner so they can show them the lavish and generous hospitality that the Persian and Arabic world is famous for.

Morgiana instantly sees through the disguise and offers to perform a sexy dance for the guest's pleasure. After what we imagine was a sultry dance, perhaps with some suggestive removal of scarves, Morgiana dances close to the guest, pulls out a dagger, and stabs him in the heart.

Morgiana receives her freedom from slavery (which she's certainly earned many times over) and marries Ali Baba's son. And of course, the entire contents of the magical treasure cave come to the family.

6 Kashmir to Kyoto, and a Lot in Between: South- and East Asian Mythology

IN THIS PART . . .

Investigate the deities and incredibly rich stories of Indian mythology, including Brahma the Creator, *karma,* and lots of very warlike gods.

Check in on Chinese mythology from Pan Gu, the first man, to Taoism, Confucius, and Buddhism.

Jump into the mythology of Japan with sibling rivalry among the gods; the hero O-Kuninushi; Shinto; and some ghost stories.

IN THIS CHAPTER

- Appreciating the Aryans' Vedic beliefs
- Developing a Hindu view of the universe
- Inventing more religions, including Buddhism and Jainism

Chapter 21
Land of a Thousand Gods: India

India is a huge country with a very large and diverse population. Over the centuries, it has been home to an enormous number of deities and religious sects. (A *sect* is a subgroup of a religious, political, or philosophical belief system, usually an offshoot of a larger group.) India is also known for its religious tolerance; all these religions have coexisted, sometimes peacefully and sometimes not, throughout the ages.

A lot of Indian beliefs come from its geography and climate. The entire land has three basic seasons: a cool season from October to February, a hot season from late February to May, and a wet season from late May to September. Myths and rituals reflect this cyclical existence, which is fertile but unpredictable.

In this chapter, we take you on a grand tour of all the major mythologies of India, starting with the beginning of recorded Indian mythology — the warlike Aryan invaders and their Vedic myths — around 1500 BCE. Hinduism gradually replaced Vedic beliefs, and we introduce you to the body of deities and stories that make up Hindu religion including the gods Brahma, Vishnu, Devi, Krishna, and the scary Kali. India also produced other religions, including Buddhism and Jainism. Buddhism is known for its founder, Buddha, and its emphasis on finding spiritual enlightenment and peace, while Jainism shares a lot with Buddhism but emphasizes self-denial (and veganism).

The Vedic Invaders

Before the cultures that now dominate India, there was an earlier one that arrived around 1500 BCE. At the time warlike people from the northwest who called themselves *Aryans* invaded India. They settled in the Indus valley.

These invaders' Vedic religion had a highly developed mythology and a bunch of gods. Above the gods were abstract forces such as *Rta,* the force of order that coordinated the cosmic and the human.

Creation of the world, animals, and people

Vedic mythology didn't exactly have a creation story. Instead, it had several myths explaining how order arose out of *primordial* (elemental) chaos. For example, in one Vedic *hymn* (song of worship), the first being to exist in the universe, the *primal being*, Purusha was sacrificed and his dismembered body parts became all the aspects of the universe: the Vedic gods, the atmosphere, heaven, earth, animals, and humans.

Then you have the stories of the *Golden Germ* or *Embryo,* which was an egg representing the world floating on the waters of chaos. The first deity rose out of this egg and formed the rest of the world.

In some myths, Heaven and Earth are the divine parents of everything. In others, the divine carpenter Tvashtar, a minor Vedic god, created Heaven and Earth (which are both places and gods at the same time) and everything else.

Warlike gods for a warlike people

The Vedic deities were called the *Devas.* Most of them were male, and they were very humanlike. Though their numbers varied, you often find 33 of them, evenly divided between heaven, atmosphere, and earth. Some of the most important ones, and the ones that show up in a lot of myths, are the rival gods Indra and Varuna.

TECHNICAL STUFF

The Aryans loved to make sacrifices of the burnt offering sort to all their Vedic gods. Worshippers would conduct rituals, say prayers, and finally burn their offering in a fire. The offering could be plant or animal; most often it was the soma plant, which Vedic worshippers used to make an intoxicating drink.

Indra, the warrior chief

Indra often acts as the head of the Vedic deities. He's the child of Heaven and Earth and separates them from one another in his position as god of the atmosphere. Huge, handsome, and strong, Indra spends all his time fighting battles. He likes to drink *soma,* an intoxicating drink that makes him swell to giant size and able to perform mighty deeds.

In later Hindu mythology, Indra is the god of rain. The Hindu deities don't think much of his warrior abilities, and he sometimes finds himself humiliated and punished for his misdeeds. (In one story, Indra seduced a wise man's wife, and his testicles fell off as punishment.)

Varuna, the old king

Varuna is Indra's chief rival among the Vedic deities. He seems to have once been the head of the gods, but Indra gradually ousted him. He guards the cosmic order and represents the static and orderly aspects of kingship, as opposed to the warrior-like and chaotic aspects that Indra embodies (see the preceding section). In later stories, Varuna's main job is god of the oceans.

A battle between gods: Devas versus Asuras

One famous myth describes a contest between the Devas, the deities who help humans, and the *Asuras,* their opponents, who are sort of anti-gods. The two groups held a contest to see who'd get the *amrita,* the elixir of immortality. They used a giant snake named Vasuki as a rope to stir up the ocean, the Asuras holding the head and the Devas the tail.

Turning the snake like a jump-rope, they churned the ocean into butter, and the earth started to fall apart. Their churning created the sun, the moon, the goddess of fortune, and the divine doctor Dhanvantari, who had the elixir. The Devas were declared the winners. An Asura called Rahu stole a drop of the elixir, but the god Vishnu decapitated him as he swallowed it. (You can read about Vishnu in the later section "Vishnu, the protector.") That drop symbolized the moon, and its waxing and waning came from the drop of *amrita* disappearing and reappearing in Rahu's throat.

Memorized mythology: The Vedas

The Aryans didn't write down their mythology. Instead, their priests memorized and taught one another the sacred songs and prayers, called *Vedas.* These are some of the most important Vedas:

- ***Rigveda:*** It was the first of the Vedic hymn collections and is the best known. It was written around the middle of the second millennium BCE in archaic Sanskrit.
- ***Sutras:*** These texts describe the practices of particular sects.
- ***Bramanas:*** These Vedas contain formulas to be recited during religious ceremonies (celebrating springtime, the harvest, or phases of the moon, for example), along with explanations and commentaries.
- ***Upanishads ("Equivalences"):*** These Vedas use parables to explain that the *atman,* or individual soul, is identical with *Brahman,* or universal soul.

Hinduism: Room for Many Gods

Hinduism gradually replaced and transformed the Vedic religion (see the preceding section). The Hindu philosophy of life arose from people's perceptions of nature, which could be generous but unpredictable. People reasoned that everything they saw and felt in the world was only an illusion and that some more powerful and eternal force must be based somewhere within the spirit.

About 16 percent of the world's population practice Hinduism today. With so many people practicing this faith, it isn't surprising that there's great diversity in the details of what Hindus of today believe, what kinds of religious rituals the practice and holidays they celebrate, and of course the stories they tell. In this chapter, we focus on ancient Hindu beliefs, gods, and myths.

Sources of Hindu myths

The first texts to explain Hinduism were the Great Epics, notably the *Mahabarata* and the *Ramayana*, which contain a huge amount of religious and mythic information. The *Mahabarata* is a collection of war stories mixed with mythological scenes and moral lessons. (The ancient Greeks had a similar work, the *Iliad* we discuss in Chapter 7.)

Most Hindu myths are in a collection called the *Puranas*, or *Antiquities*, which was composed around the fourth century CE. The *Puranas* explain Hindu religious practices, mythology, and *cosmology* (their idea of what the universe looked like and how it was organized), mixed with information on more secular subjects.

TECHNICAL STUFF

Hindu myths were written in a language called Sanskrit, which was the language people used when they wanted their writing to be readable all across India. Sanskrit functioned as an international language in India much the way Latin did in Europe.

The creation of the world and Brahma, the creator

Brahma is the creator god. While he meditated, he created the elements of the universe. His lifespan is identical to the duration of the universe.

REMEMBER

Brahma's life cycle had an important significance to Hindus. Hindus saw time in terms of vast cycles that repeat throughout eternity. These cycles include smaller ones such as the yearly renewal of the crops and larger ones such as the massive cycle of Brahma's life. His life is supposed to last 100 Brahmanic years, and each of those years equals 311.04 trillion (311,040,000,000,000) human years.

Brahma is usually depicted with four heads, one facing to each point of the compass: north, east, south, and west. Some stories say he originally had five heads but lost one under mysterious circumstances. He started with only one head but sprouted some new ones when his beautiful daughter walked around him in a circle. He and his daughter had a son together: Manu, the first man.

The other big gods: Some okay guys

Hinduism had a ton of gods, and we don't attempt to name them all. Its three major gods formed a sort of trinity: Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva. See the preceding section for the scoop on Brahma.

Vishnu, the protector

Vishnu is the guardian of humanity and the protector of the *dharma*, the concept of cosmic order. At the beginning of the universe, he made three giant strides that marked the boundaries of the world for deities and humans. A good friend of the Vedic warrior god Indra (see the earlier section "Indra, the warrior chief"), Vishnu is also a friend to humans.

Vishnu often came to earth to help out, especially when humans were threatened by evil. But he never came just as himself, preferring to take different forms called *avatars.* Although people disagree somewhat on details, most Hindus agree that Vishnu has ten avatars (that is, ten different forms, under different circumstances):

- **Matsya,** the fish, protected the first man (Manu) from the great flood that destroyed the world.
- **Kurma,** the tortoise, held Mount Mandara on his back when the gods were churning the ocean.
- **Varaha,** the boar, raised the earth out of the ocean with his tusk.
- **Narasimha,** the man-lion, killed the demon Hiranyakashipu.
- **Vamana,** the dwarf, saved the world from the demon Bali.
- **Parashurama,** the *Brahman* (the creative force). According to legend, he killed the king Kartavirya Arjuna in order to steal his magical heavenly cow Surabhi; then, when the entire warrior class of India took arms and came to fight him, he destroyed them all except for two. Then he killed his own mother. But after that, he gave up violence, and spent all his time guarding the coast of India.
- **Rama** is the hero of the *Ramayana* and was (and still is) one of the most popular avatars; he had his own *cult* (a specific set of practices that some people engage in). His bravery in fighting demons and his compassion toward everyone made him a role model.
- **Krishna** is another major figure in Hindu myth. He was such a great favorite and was the legendary author of Hinduisms most famous poem (and source of mythology) that we've given him his own special section. (See the next section for more about Krishna.)
- The **Buddha** helped punish the sinful; he's a bit different from the Buddhist idea of the Buddha.
- **Kalkin,** the future avatar, will appear as a warrior on a white horse (or as a white horse) and will establish a new era.

Krishna

Krishna, Vishnu's eighth avatar, was a great favorite. Before Krishna was born, the king of his parents' country heard a prophecy that Krishna would kill him. The king imprisoned Krishna's pregnant mother to prevent that from happening, but Krishna's parents smuggled him away after his birth. He was an adorable infant, always stealing butter for a snack. When he grew up, he killed two demons and the king who imprisoned his mother.

Everyone loved Krishna. His skin is the beautiful blue of rain-bearing clouds, and he sparkles with jewels. He symbolizes the link among nature, the land, and faith. He's the god of cattle and spent much of his time cavorting with the cow-girls in his native land. One night, he duplicated himself many times so that he could make love to a whole crowd of them.

TECHNICAL STUFF

Hindus have revered the cow for centuries. Aryans measured their wealth in terms of cows. Even today, cows are sacred in many parts of India.

Krishna's most famous speech is the *Bhagavad-gita,* or "Celestial Song," at the end of the *Mahabarata.* In the poem, the warrior Arjuna is about to enter battle but hesitates, wondering whether killing his relatives is okay. Krishna, his charioteer, assures him that it is. Life and death are an illusion, so duty is everything; if it's time to kill, then get killing!

Shiva, the sexy destroyer

Shiva, shown in Figure 21-1, is known as the destroyer of the universe. He's often depicted sitting alone on a tiger skin on top of Mount Kailas in the Himalayas, deep in meditation. He's also called Lord of the Dance, portrayed as a four-armed man dancing on the back of a dwarf to a drum that beat the rhythm of the universe.

FIGURE 21-1: Shiva the destroyer.

© Shutterstock

Shiva wears a necklace of skulls and a garland of snakes and has a third eye in the middle of his forehead. Shiva also represents the erotic side of life and is often depicted as a *linga,* a phallic statue.

The goddesses: A mixed bag

Hinduism had many goddesses, too. Some were powerful warrior women, while others embodied more conventional female virtues. We tell you about the all-purpose goddess Devi, the wealthy Shri (or Lakshmi), and Sati (or Parvati) and her elephant-headed baby, who helps people overcome challenges.

Devi, the every-goddess

The goddess Devi is really a composite of various goddesses; in fact, her name means "goddess." She's linked with Shiva's main wife Sati/Parvati and also comprises some more fearsome goddesses:

- **Durga:** She's the warrior goddess, whose main job is to fight demons.
- **Sitala:** She's the goddess of smallpox and other skin diseases.
- **Manasa:** She's the Bengali goddess of snakes.
- **Hariti and Shashti:** They're goddesses of childbirth.
- **Mata:** She's the mother goddess, associated with the earth and great rivers such as the Ganges.

Devi, in all her myriad forms, is one of Hinduism's major deities.

Shri/Lakshmi, goddess of prosperity

Shri is Vishnu's wife (or consort). She was born back in Vedic times when the gods churned the ocean with the snake Vasuki. (See the earlier section "A battle between gods: Devas versus Asuras" for that story.) She gradually became the ideal of the perfect Hindu wife: loyal and submissive.

Shri is also an agricultural fertility goddess. When she sat next to Indra (see the earlier section "Indra, the warrior chief"), he poured down rain to make the crops grow. Her presence in Vishnu's life (see the earlier section "Vishnu, the protector") guarantees the earth's fertility.

Sati/Parvati

Sati, the daughter of the cattle god Daksha, is Shiva's original wife. (Flip to the earlier section "Shiva, the sexy destroyer" for more on him.) One day, all the gods were going to a sacrifice arranged by her father — all except for Shiva, who hadn't been invited. Sati was so ashamed of Shiva's being excluded from the sacrifice that she burned herself to death.

Sati was reincarnated as Parvati (also known as Uma). Parvati went to work civilizing Shiva and introducing him to family life. Many of the myths about Shiva and Parvati feature little domestic details, such as their son Skanda playing with Shiva's skull necklace.

Parvati wanted another child, so she collected the rubbings that came from her body as she bathed and formed them into her son Ganesh. She put him on guard outside her bedroom, but when he denied Shiva entrance, Shiva knocked his head off. Parvati demanded that Shiva give her son a new head, so he looked around and gave him the first head he saw — an elephant's! You can see Ganesh in Figure 21-2.

FIGURE 21-2: Ganesh, remover of great obstacles.

© Shutterstock

REMEMBER

Ganesh is still a popular Hindu god; he's the one who removes great obstacles. His brother Skanda is a favorite in southern India.

Kali, the scary one

Kali's job is to destroy demons. She's an ugly, terrifying hag, with long fangs and a necklace of human skulls. She spent most of her time on battlefields or at cremation sites and sometimes became so intoxicated with blood that she'd try to destroy the entire world.

Life after life: What you sow is what you reap

Hindus believe in *reincarnation,* the rebirth of a soul in another body. After a person dies, their soul immediately flies into another body that's being born. The new body doesn't have its own soul yet and is ready to receive one from a newly dead person. Thus, a person who dies will immediately be born again. In Hindu belief, this cycle of birth, life, death, and rebirth goes on for eons.

Karma is the sum of a person's accumulated good and bad deeds and determines what happens in the next life. A Hindu can improve their karma by doing pure acts, thinking pure thoughts, and performing prayers and rituals of worship. Improved karma can help them get reborn into a better life. The ultimate goal of life is to rack up so many karmic points that you don't get reborn at all but instead achieve enlightenment.

Two Coexisting Religions: Buddhism and Jainism

Buddhism and Jainism were two other important Indian belief systems. They both preached renunciation of worldly things, but in very different ways. While the Buddha emphasized moderation in all things, the Jains went all the way; some of them even gave up clothes!

Buddhism and its start in India

Buddhism is a religion and set of philosophical beliefs about how to live, how to treat others, and how to be content in oneself. It's named after its founder, the Buddha, and focuses on helping people give up attachment to things that don't matter — monetary wealth, anger, pride, and vanity, but also including sometimes one's own life.

Buddhism isn't practiced much in India these days; most Buddhists live in China and other parts of Asia. But it got its start in India, so we discuss its origins here.

Buddha and the journey to enlightenment

Siddhartha, the founder of Buddhism, was born to noble parents who decided he should never see anything unpleasant so that his entire life would be happy. They raised him in a sheltered environment.

TECHNICAL STUFF

The founder of Buddhism's full name was Siddhartha Gautama, and many English sources refer to him as Gautama. He was born in Nepal around 563 BCE.

After he'd grown up and married, the young prince went walking outside one day. For the first time in his life, he saw a sick person, an old person, and a dead person — all very shocking. Then he saw a wandering holy man — intriguing. He became obsessed with suffering and how to avoid it. At the age of 29, he left his wife and child and set off in search of truth.

Siddhartha embraced starving, meditating, and learning how to be calm and peaceful even when in pain. He encouraged people to seek out discomfort in order to practice ignoring it, such as wearing a painfully scratchy shirt. (This intentional quest for pain in order to overcome it is called *mortifying the flesh*.) After a few years, though, he decided that this path, called *asceticism,* wasn't the path to truth, and he didn't know what was.

So he abandoned his practice of discomfort, got something to eat, and sat down in the shade of a tree — the famous Bodhi Tree — resolving to sit there until he knew what life was all about. He meditated for 49 days, tormented by demons, but he achieved his ultimate goal in the end: enlightenment! At this point he became the Buddha, the Enlightened One.

Do practice moderation and don't suffer

Buddha found his former disciples in the village of Sarnath, near the holy city of Benares, and preached his first sermon. He argued that moderation in all things was the key to avoiding suffering. People suffer when they can't have what they want, so the way to avoid that was to abandon all desire.

Buddha listed eight rules, or *precepts,* for his believers to live by:

- Right views
- Right intention
- Right speech
- Right conduct
- Right livelihood
- Right effort
- Right mindfulness
- Right meditation

Of course, the question is, "What is 'right'?" All of the Buddha's teachings, and millions of words written by Buddhist priests and teaching in the centuries since then, try to work out and explain what is meant by "right" in each of those cases.

Buddhism didn't limit believers to any particular set of religious doctrines but instead aimed at transcending dogma and teaching a practical wisdom that could help humans attain an ideal state. Those who wished to become free from suffering had to free themselves from all attachments by following the eight precepts and meditating. Only then would they be able to attain perfect freedom, or *nirvana.*

Jainism: Give it up!

Around the same time that Buddha was enlightening his followers (see the earlier section "Buddhism and its start in India"), another young nobleman was creating his own religion that was nothing like Buddhism.

Another journey with a different ending

Vardhamana, founder of the Jain sect, was born around in the 500s BCE. Like Siddhartha, he left his wife and child to seek truth.

Vardhamana joined a sect that practiced radical self-denial. He gave up all his possessions, keeping nothing but one robe to wear. After 12 years of wandering around seeking truth, he didn't even have that. And that point, starving and naked, is when he reached enlightenment.

A very strict vegan

Vardhamana adopted the name *Mahavira,* which means "Great Hero," and began to preach a doctrine of self-denial. His followers went naked and plucked out their beards. He refused to kill any animal, even insects, and even avoided onions because they may contain tiny, invisible creatures.

Mahavira spent the rest of his life preaching and trying to win people over to his faith, thus increasing the membership of his sect. Today several million Jains practice worldwide.

IN THIS CHAPTER

- Creating the world, the Chinese way
- Going with the flow Taoist style
- Following the rules of Confucianism
- Seeing Buddhism through a Chinese lens

Chapter 22

Get out the Fine China: Early Chinese Myth and the Three Teachings

China is a big place, and it has been civilized for a long time. Such a land is bound to have a rich and deep pool of deities, myths, and religious beliefs, including many ancient and mysterious stories about the origins of the earth and humankind.

China has three main traditional religions: the "three teachings" of Taoism, Confucianism, and Buddhism. These belief systems — the morals from Confucianism, the life philosophy of Taoism, and the idea of the afterlife from Buddhism — work together and complement one another. The history of all three goes very far back, and (like the histories of all belief-systems that people hold onto) their roots are in mythology.

In this chapter, we discuss ancient Chinese myths and the way the three more modern belief systems of Taoism, Confucianism, and Buddhism were influenced by Chinese mythology and ritual. This chapter shares some Chinese creation myths, a, a story about a universal flood, the eight immortal of Taoist myth, stories about Confucius, and a little about Buddhism (which is covered also in Chapter 21).

How the World and Humanity Began: Ancient Chinese Creation Myths

Written versions of the oldest Chinese myths date from the third and fourth centuries BCE, but the stories themselves are considerably older. Long before scholars wrote stories down, people had been passing them from generation to generation the old-fashioned way: orally.

These stories describe the formation of the earth, the creation of people, and how the earth went from having ten suns to the one and only sun that we enjoy today. And like many bodies of myth, China has a flood story, too.

Pan Gu, the first man

In the Pan Gu myth, the universe began as an egg. The egg split open; the top half became the sky, and the bottom half became the earth. The sky was called Yang and the earth Yin. Yin and yang came to be seen as opposite aspects of human nature (and of everything else; we cover the opposition of Yin and Yang in the later section "Harmony of opposites: The beliefs"). Pan Gu, the child of Yin and Yang, also emerged from the broken egg. He was the first human.

Every day, Pan Gu grew ten feet. As he grew, he pushed apart the earth and sky, so the sky grew ten feet higher, and the earth became ten feet thicker. After 18,000 years, the earth and sky were in their proper places.

Pan Gu died, and his body split into many pieces. His right eye became the moon, and his left eye the sun. His blood became the rivers and seas; his hair the forests; his sweat the rain; his breath the wind; and his voice thunder. The rest of his body turned into rocks, rivers, plants, and mountains. Even the fleas on his body transformed into other humans. In some versions of the story the fleas become animals, while Pan Gu molds human beings out of clay. A lot of cultures' myths have humans being formed by a god out of clay (Chapter 17 includes another example of this kind of myth).

A melon goddess and her little creations

In another Chinese creation myth, Nü Gua is the creator goddess. She and the creator god Fu Xi are sometimes depicted as a married couple with human heads and snakes' tails. Their names come from Chinese words meaning "melon" or "gourd," a symbol of fertility in Chinese culture.

Molded from mud

After the earth was created (in this story, we don't get details of *how* the earth was created), Nü Gua felt that something was missing. One day, she glimpsed her reflection in a pool and had an idea. She grabbed some mud, sculpted a little statue of a creature that looked like her, and brought it to life. This creation was the first human.

The goddess liked her handiwork, so she made some more humans, who went about their lives. Nü Gua didn't feel lonely anymore. But sculpting each human by hand was slow work, so she came up with a more efficient method: She dipped a vine in the mud and flicked it so droplets flew off all over the place. Each tiny drop turned into another human.

Now the world was populated, and Nü Gua could rest. But after a while, some of her little people grew old and died. Instead of making replacement people all by herself, she taught the humans who were still alive how to reproduce themselves.

A fight between gods threatens humans

The fire god had been ruling the universe, but the water god decided he wanted the job. The water god sent all the oceans and rivers to fight for him, but the water evaporated in the heat of the fire god's sun.

In his rage, the water god knocked over the *Imperfect Mountain,* the peak that held up the sky in the northwestern corner of the world. This destruction left holes in both earth and sky, and the world tipped over, its southeast corner toward the bottom. The incident caused great natural disasters such as forest fires and floods. All the water rushed downhill toward the southeast; people said that was why rivers in China ran west to east.

Nü Gua came to the rescue of her little humans. She filled the hole in the sky with some stones. To make sure it wouldn't break again, she killed a giant tortoise and used its body to prop up the sky where the Imperfect Mountain had been. Then she fixed all the riverbanks, ending the floods.

Too Hot to Handle: Hou Yi shoots down the extra suns

One Chinese myth says that the earth originally was blessed with 10 suns. Initially, the suns would cross the sky one by one, providing lovely constant light for the crops to grow. But one day (for reasons not at all clear) all ten suns started crossing the sky at the same time. The blessing had become a curse! The sky blazed with heat, and nothing could grow.

The mythical and magical King Yao called upon the famous archer Hou Yi to rid the sky of the terrible, burning suns. According to the story, Hou Yi — who seems to have been a reasonable guy — didn't resort to shooting at first, despite that being his great talent. He tried to use argument and logic to persuade the suns to behave. But when that didn't work, he started shooting arrows. One by one he shot the suns out of the sky. He got so into his work that he almost shot down all the suns.

In one version of the story, a young boy realized what a mistake that would be and stole Hou Yi's last arrow. In another version of the story, King Yao tried to persuade Hou Yi to leave one sun for the earth. When the sun's mother Xihe (a solar goddess) pleaded with him, Hou Yi gave in and saved one sun to provide light and warmth for half of the day.

Saved by a gourd: A flood story

Like the Hebrews, the Greeks and Romans, and the ancient people of Mesopotamia (see Chapters 17, 3, and 11), the ancient Chinese had a myth about a great flood. A farmer was at home with his son and daughter when it started to rain. The farmer decided to catch the thunder god to stop the rain. He got a cage and a big fork and stood waiting by his front door.

With a great flash of lightning and a loud crash, the thunder god flew down holding a giant battle-axe. The farmer caught him on his fork, shoved him in the cage, and locked him in. The rain stopped.

The bitter fruit of small favors

The next day, the farmer went to the market to buy ingredients to cook the thunder god. He told his children not to give the god anything to drink, no matter how much he pleaded.

While the farmer was gone, the god began to beg for water so piteously that the children finally gave him some. As soon as the water touched his lips, he broke the bars of his cage.

To repay the children for their help, he pulled a tooth from his mouth and told them to plant it in the ground. Then he left. The boy and the girl planted the tooth, and it grew into a gourd plant bearing a giant gourd.

The wrath of the water god!

The rain came back harder than ever — so hard that the ground began to flood. The children's father came home from the market and told his kids to get

inside the gourd. He built a boat and sailed it up to heaven to ask the king of the gods to stop the flood.

The king of the gods asked the water god to give it a rest. The water god stopped the flood so suddenly that the farmer's boat crashed down on the ground, killing him. (Oops!) The boy and girl in the gourd, though, bounced on the ground and landed safely.

A second start for humanity

When the children climbed out of the gourd, they discovered they were the only people left on earth. The boy asked his sister to marry him. At first, she hesitated, but then she said she'd marry him if he chased her and caught her. He did, and they lived happily ever after.

The girl gave birth to a strange baby shaped like a ball of flesh. The pair sliced it up into many chunks and carried the pieces up the ladder toward heaven. A gust of wind blew the pieces of flesh in all directions. When they landed, they turned into humans, and the earth was populated again.

Taoism: Keeping Your Balance

Taoism was supposedly founded by Lao Tzu (his name has a bunch of different spellings in English, including Lao-Tse, Laozi, and so on). Lao Tzu lived in the sixth century BCE, around the same time as Confucius, whom we discuss in the "Confucianism: Myths of Devotion" section later in this chapter. Lao Tzu advocated a search for balance and claimed that changes can't be forced, only experienced and assimilated.

REMEMBER

Tao means "the way" or "the path." Tao regulates the universe, enveloping and flowing through everything. Taoism isn't a unified religion in the sense that Christianity is; instead, it's a combination of teachings and a philosophy of life.

Little or nothing is known about Lao Tzu's life and teachings. According to legend, he rode around on a water buffalo, spreading his ideas. His teachings are supposedly summarized in the book *Tao Te Ching,* but someone else may actually have written it.

Harmony of opposites: The beliefs

REMEMBER

Taoism emphasizes the harmony of opposites, such as male/female, light/ dark, love/hate, and good/evil. It uses the concept of yin and yang to depict this harmony. *Yang* (associated with maleness) is the pure light breath that makes up heaven. *Yin* (associated with femaleness) is the heavier, opaque breath that forms the earth. Neither force can exist without the other.

Chi is the fundamental energy that flows through everything, animating the world; it also means "breath," the life force flowing through all living things. As plants, animals, and people are born and die, and as the shape of mountains and rivers changes, Taoism sees the universe re-creating itself constantly.

REMEMBER

Taoism itself has no real gods, certainly none that anyone can pray to. Instead, Taoists are supposed to seek answers to the questions of life through observation and meditation.

But even though Taoism doesn't have any official deities, most early followers persisted in believing that spirits pervaded nature, gods reigned in heaven, and demons lurked in hell. They treated the gods the same way they treated secular officials, and they bribed the demons for better treatment.

Facets of humanity and the Eight Immortals

The Eight Immortals were legendary humans who achieved immortality by following Taoism. They represented all aspects of humanity, including youth and age, male and female (though most of them were male), and wealth and poverty. Some of the Immortals may have been based on actual historical figures. They inspired art and drama, and their stories served as proof that anyone could become immortal if they did the right things.

Each Immortal has their own story and significance, as we explain in the following sections. Each represents a different group of people (for example, the nobility or single women) and carries objects (or symbols) that help identify them.

The military man: Han Chung-li, the hermit

Han Chung-li was a nobleman who became a hermit. One day while he sat meditating in his cave, the walls cracked open and revealed a chamber lit with strange light. Inside the small room was a jade casket that contained the secrets of immortality. Han Chung-li followed the instructions. The cave filled with music and

perfume, and a magical stork flew in and carried him away on its back, off to the magical mountain island of P'eng-lai (also known as the island of the gods), where the gods are sometimes said to live or at least gather for feasts.

Han Chung-li can turn base metals into silver, giving the proceeds to the poor. He carries a peach (symbol of immortality) or a fan made of feathers, and he represents the military.

The magically reborn: Chang-kuo Lao

On his way to have dinner with the emperor one day, Chang-kuo Lao fell down dead at the temple gate. He began to rot. But then he miraculously revived and noticed he had magical powers: He could turn birds to stone, drink poison without dying, and become invisible. After some years, he died (again) in his mountain retreat. His followers buried him, but when his tomb was opened later, his body wasn't inside; he'd become one of the immortals.

Chang-kuo Lao has a white donkey that he rides backward. He can fold this donkey up and put it in his pocket. He carries a peacock feather or a peach. He represents the old and brings fertility to young couples. He was also said to travel around with a tube-shaped drum, which he played (presumably very loudly) with iron mallets.

The lifelong student: Lu Tung-pin and fleeting material success

Lu Tung-pin was a government official preoccupied with advancing his career. One day, he met the first Immortal, Han Chung-li, at an inn. (Head to the earlier section "The military man: Han Chung-li, the hermit" for more on him.) The two men drank and talked about the Tao until nightfall. Lu Tung-pin fell asleep at the table and had a nightmare in which his enemies convinced the emperor to fire him and he lost his home and family. Then he awoke and saw Han Chung-Li smiling at him.

Realizing that worldly possessions and status had nothing to do with true Taoism, Lu Tung-pin sent away his servants, cancelled his appointments, and went off with Han Chung-li. After years of study, Lu Tung-pin became an Immortal himself.

As an Immortal, Lu Tung-pin travels the world selling oil and occasionally granting immortality to others. He has a magic sword that can make him invisible and slay dragons. He sometimes holds a *fly-whisk* (a flyswatter that's sort of like a ponytail on a stick) to symbolize the fact that he can fly. He represents students.

The nobility: Ts'ao Kuo-chiu gets a second chance

Ts'ao Kuo-chiu was the brother of Empress Ts'ao. His brother tried to rape a young woman who was visiting the castle. Ts'ao Kuo-chiu advised this brother to kill the unfortunate woman, so the brother threw the woman down a well.

The woman showed a lot of courage and resourcefulness and escaped the well. But then she made the strategic mistake of complaining to Ts'ao Kuo-chiu. Blaming the victim has a long, long history among humans, unfortunately, and when the women complained, Ts'ao Kuo-chiu had her beaten with iron poles. She then escalated her complaint up to the Imperial Censor. Ts'ao Kuo-chiu' brother was executed for attempted murder. Ts'ao Kuo-chiu was also sentenced to die.

Before the executioner could get to Ts'ao Kuo-chiu, the emperor declared amnesty. Realizing his life had been empty and evil, Ts'ao Kuo-chiu repented, became a hermit, and eventually an Immortal. As an Immortal, Ts'ao Kuo-chiu carries a writing tablet and represents the nobility.

The patron of the Sick: Li T'ieh-kuai and the iron crutch

Li T'ieh-kuai learned Tao from Lao Tzu (the founder of Taoism) himself. Before Li T'ieh-kuai died, he told his assistant not to burn his body until seven days had passed, just in case he came back from heaven. The assistant watched for six days and then heard that his own mother was dying. He figured Li T'ieh-kuai wouldn't be coming back after so long, so he burned the body and went to his mother.

Li T'ieh-kuai's soul returned later that day and discovered that his body was a pile of ashes. The only available body was that of a disabled beggar who had starved to death. Li T'ieh-kuai wanted to exchange the body for a healthier one, but Lao Tzu suggested that he keep it and gave him some helpful gifts: a gold headband, an iron crutch, and a gourd that could restore life. Li T'ieh-kuai went to his assistant's house, found him weeping over his mother's body, and restored her to life with the gourd.

As an Immortal, Li T'ieh-kuai represents the sick. Pharmacists put his picture on their signs.

The cultured one: Han Hsiang-Tzu and a fortunate fall

Han Hsiang Tzu was the nephew of Han Yu, a great philosopher and poet who tried to guide the boy's education. However, Han Hsiang-Tzu preferred dallying in magic to studying for the civil service exams as his uncle wanted him to. He was expelled from a Buddhist temple for his mischief and quick temper.

Han Hsiang Tzu tried to climb the tree of immortality but fell out. Luckily, he became immortal just before hitting the ground. He represents culture and carries a flower basket or a flute.

The simple minstrel: Lan Ts'ai-ho

Lan Ts'ai-ho's family sold medicinal herbs. One day, she found an old beggar covered with sores and took care of him. The beggar was really the Immortal Li T'ieh-kuai in disguise. (You can read about him in the earlier section "The patron of the Sick: Li T'ieh-kuai and the iron crutch.") Lan Ts'ai-ho's reward was eternal youth.

Lan Ts'ai-ho wanders around in a torn blue robe and only one shoe. She does lots of ridiculous things such as sleeping in the snow in winter and wearing thermal underwear in the summer. She's a minstrel, singing in different towns and urging people to seek the Tao. She carries a lute (or a basket of fruit or flowers) and represents the poor.

The single lady: Good girl Ho Hsien-ku

Ho Hsien-ku achieved immortality after dreaming of going to the mother-of-pearl mountains, where she ground up and ate a pearl that made her immortal. After this transformation, she spent her time wandering around the mountains, picking berries for her mother. The emperor summoned her to court so he could see the immortal woman, but she disappeared.

In this myth, Ho Hsien-ku had only six hairs on her head, but pictures of her usually show a full head of hair. She carries a lotus and represents single women.

Confucianism: Myths of Devotion

The founder of Confucianism was a man called K'ung Fu Tzu who was born in 551 BCE in what's now Shantung province. (We call him by his English name, Confucius.) Confucius was an expert on etiquette and behavior who went around China advising different rulers on how to behave. He was obsessed with eradicating the "moral laxity" that he perceived all around him. He wrote a number of works on individual morality and the proper methods of ruling and using political power. Confucius emphasized several values, including etiquette, love within the family, righteousness, honesty, benevolence, and loyalty to the state.

REMEMBER

Confucian philosophy puts great importance on how people treat the elders in their families, especially parents and grandparents. Many stories in Chinese literature illustrate the proper way to treat elders. The story of the origin of silk demonstrates a daughter's devotion to her father, and the tale of a son searching for his father's remains shows an extreme case of what children should do for their parents. The following sections tell you these two stories.

Lady Silkworm and her dad

A girl loved her father very much, and she was sorry that he was away on business so often. One day while she was grooming her stallion, she said, "I'd marry anyone who brought father home." The horse immediately dashed away and returned the next day with the girl's father.

For the next few days, the horse got very excited every time the girl walked by. She finally told her father what she had said just before the horse galloped away. Furious that a horse would think of marrying his daughter, the dad had the stallion killed and laid its skin in the sun to dry.

The girl and her friends were playing around the skin when it suddenly wrapped itself around her and flew away. The girl's father found the horse skin on top of a tree. Inside the skin was a caterpillar.

His daughter had transformed into Lady Silkworm. She waved her head and emitted a glossy white thread, which made the most wonderful cloth in the world.

A boy and his father's bones

When Chou was 13, his father died in a far-off land. Worried that the funeral rituals wouldn't be effective without a body, Chou's grandparents made him promise to retrieve his father's bones after they died.

When the time came, Chou started working his way across the countryside. Everywhere he went, people were impressed with his devotion to his father but tried to persuade him to go home to his mother because his journey would be terribly long, and he'd never find the body. But Chou journeyed onward, facing bandits, civil unrest, hunger, and the plague.

Twenty years after his dad died, Chou finally came to the spot where his father was buried. The local officials told him that finding his father's actual bones would be impossible after so much time. Chou vowed that if he didn't find the bones within two weeks, he'd throw himself into the river. And at that very moment, he saw his father's tombstone.

Chou spent the night digging up the body. He cut skin from his arm to close his father's mouth, burnt money and incense, and wrapped each bone for the trip back home. The return voyage was considerably easier; a general had heard his story and gave him money so he could travel by boat. When he arrived at home, his mother greeted him joyfully. They buried the bones with the proper funeral rites. News spread about Chou's devotion, and even the emperor sent words of praise.

Buddhism: Letting it Go

The Chinese translated the Buddhist scriptures from Sanskrit (an Indian written language) into their own language. The translators modified Buddhist beliefs to fit their own view of human existence, especially Confucian logic. Chinese Buddhism puts more emphasis on relationships with others, especially the family and the hierarchy of society. Chapter 21 has the details Buddhism's Indian origins.

A myth about the beginnings of Chinese Buddhism describes how Emperor Ming dreamed he saw a golden man flying in front of him as he looked out the palace window. He told his ministers about this dream, and they said there was a golden man in India who could fly. The emperor sent messengers to India to find the man; they returned with Buddhist scriptures.

A deity or two

The Chinese worshipped a manifestation of Buddha called Amitabha. He grants salvation to anyone who repents their sins and calls his name — that is, worshippers of Amitabha can attain salvation through faith alone, which means the average person can achieve it more easily. Temples throughout China have statues of Amitabha sitting on a lotus blossom.

Amitabha is often accompanied by the goddess of mercy, the Bodhisattva Guanyin. She was originally a male Indian Bodhisattva, but the Chinese saw her as depicting motherly virtues and made her female. Mothers would pray to her to help their children. She once saved some holy books that a Chinese Buddhist was taking from India to China. She can also break chains, counteract lightning, and remove venom from snakes.

A little Buddhism, a little Confucianism

Chinese Buddhists embellished on the myths about the Buddha, often adding details about *filial piety* (the respect that a daughter or son show to their parents) to appeal to the Confucian mindset. In one famous tale, a disciple of Buddha named Mulian traveled through the layers of hell seeking his mother, who was suffering torment for failing to donate to the Buddhist monks during her life. He found her in one of the deepest levels nailed to a bed. The jailer refused to release her without the Buddha's permission. Mulian found the Buddha, who agreed to release her. She returned to earth as a black dog (but later turned back to a human).

IN THIS CHAPTER

- Combining Shinto and Buddhism for a balanced spiritual life
- Creating the world and settling sibling disputes
- Meeting monsters, mythical beasts, and beautiful maidens

Chapter 23

Japan: Myths from the Land of the Rising Sun

Japan has always been a bit isolated from the rest of Asia. It has a history of opening its doors to import ideas from abroad, mostly from China and Korea, and then shutting them again for a while.

Most traditional Japanese beliefs and practices come from Shinto, the only organized religion to arise in Japan. Buddhism, Confucianism, and Taoism (which we cover in Chapter 22) added ideas of harmony with nature, social order, and the possibility of salvation to the native Shinto concepts.

In this chapter we look at the rituals, of ancient Japan, which are often based in mythology and shaped by the two religions of Shinto and Buddhism. We share some stories about the creation of the world and the first gods and humans. This chapter also takes you to the land of the dead. We tell you some supernatural stories about demons, ghosts, and some real party-animals.

Rituals for Everything, in Two Religions

Many Japanese people today follow both Shinto and Buddhist traditions. The two religions go well together because they share a sense of optimism and a pragmatic attitude toward human nature and the world. The two religions are not incompatible.

The founder of Buddhism, the Buddha, is seen in Shinto tradition as a *Kami*, or god, and Buddhism sees the various *Kami* that Shinto recognizes as manifestations of the Buddha.

The way of the gods: Shinto beliefs

Shinto is an ancient Japanese religion that started around 500 BCE, or even earlier, and evolved over several centuries. The name "Shinto" comes from the Chinese words *shin tao,* which means "the way of the gods." It began as a mix of nature worship, fertility *cults* (a specific set of beliefs and practices held by a specific group of people), and other religious activities; it had no real founder or written scriptures. Even now, it has just a loosely organized priesthood and no precise theology, moral code, or ideas of the afterlife. Shinto emphasizes peace.

REMEMBER

Four important aspects of Shinto are

- Tradition and the family
- Love of nature
- Ritual purity
- Worship of the *Kami* (gods)

Kami is a Japanese word meaning "god" or "deity." Kami are everywhere: in food, rivers, rocks, places, and families. They're generally benign, protecting and nurturing people. People think of themselves as the children of the kami, and therefore they see human life as sacred. Shrines to kami are everywhere in Japan: on mountaintops, at springs, in the middle of forests. Each shrine is dedicated to a specific kami who can answer the prayers of the faithful.

Ancestors are extremely important in Shinto. Many families keep an altar called the *Kami-dana* (Shelf of Gods) in their homes. At the yearly festival called O-Bon, all the dead ancestors come back to visit for a few days. People put offerings of food — potato chips and beer or *sake* (Japanese rice wine) — on their doorsteps for the dead to enjoy and make little horses out of eggplants and toothpicks for them to ride back home on.

Ceremonies for the Kami include offerings, prayers, and ritual dances accompanied by musical instruments. Shrines hold annual festivals for planting, harvest, and special anniversaries. Some of the most important festivals are the New Year, the Hinamatsuri Girls' Festival (March 3), Tango no Sekku Boys' Festival (May 5), and Hoshi Matsuri Star Festival (July 7). National Founding Day falls on February 11, commemorating the date on which the first emperor ascended the throne in 660 BCE.

Buddhism, Japanese-style

Buddhism arrived in Japan from Korea and China in the sixth and seventh centuries. Buddhism is a religion and set of philosophical beliefs, founded by a figure known as the Buddha, that emphasizes helping people let go of unimportant things (wealth, status, vanity) and seek inner peace. (We describe Buddhism and its origins in India in Chapter 21.)

Tradition says a Korean king sent a Buddhist mission to Japan around the year 552. (Modern scholars think it was probably earlier, maybe 538.) The emperor and some of his nobles embraced the new religion. Other members of the court claimed the native deities would be offended if the Japanese people embraced a foreign religion. The two factions fought a battle over this issue (a real battle, with soldiers and weapons), and Buddhism's supporters won. Buddhism became the state religion in the 700s CE.

Japanese Buddhism emphasizes the importance of human institutions, practical morality, and a work ethic. It's incorporated into every level of Japan's hierarchical society, stressing family loyalty and reverence for ancestors. Believers worship the founders of various sects.

Japanese Buddhists prefer to accept the world as it is instead of speculating on the meaning of life. They try to understand the absolute through reference to the physical world. Buddhists in Japan have always been willing to incorporate ancient ritual practices and the native Shinto beliefs. Though Buddhist and Shinto priests are very different from one another, very few Japanese people see any contradiction in being Buddhist and Shinto at the same time.

Creation and Ancient Matters

Most Japanese mythology comes from a document called the *Kojiki*, the "Record of Ancient Matters." A man named Ono Yasumaro composed it in the year 711 at the Empress Gemmei's request. He used several earlier texts to put together his work, which was in a mixture of Chinese and old Japanese.

Other sources of myths include the *Nihonshoki* (Chronicle of Japan), written in 720; the *Kogoshui* (Gleanings from Ancient Stories) of 807; and an anthology of poetry called the *Manyoshu*, compiled around 760.

These very long ancient books contain thousands of stories about the early days of the world, the gods, and the heroic deeds of early human beings.

The first gods and the first people

In the beginning, the earth drifted like a jellyfish. Five gods appeared on the high plains of heaven; these were the *Separate Heavenly Deities.* Seven more generations of gods and goddesses followed. Finally, the first creator couple appeared: a man called Izanagi and his sister/wife, Izanami. Their marriage sets the stage for all the subsequent myths about the early days of the world.

The gods told the pair to solidify the land. So they stood on the Floating Bridge of Heaven and stirred the waters with a jeweled spear. As they lifted the spear out of the water, drops fell from it and formed an island called Onogoro.

The first marriage: How does that go again?

Izanami and Izanagi went down to Onogoro (see the preceding section) and built a palace and a pillar. This time seemed as good as any to start reproducing, so Izanagi asked his sister how her body was made. She said she was missing something in one place. Izanagi replied that that was a great coincidence, because he had a little extra something in the same place. He suggested they get together and unite these two spots.

First, though, they had to get married. They made up their own marriage ceremony: They walked around the pillar in opposite directions and exchanged compliments when they met on the other side. Then they had sex.

Their first child was the deformed Hiruko, or leech-child. They put the baby in a boat and set it on the ocean, presumably to die. They asked the gods what had gone wrong, and the deities decided the problem must have been that Izanami, the woman, had spoken first during their marriage ritual when in fact her husband should've been the first to speak.

The pair returned to their palace and pillar and redid their marriage ritual. This time Izanagi spoke first when they met. As the gods had predicted, Izanami then gave birth successfully to many fine children; these were the many islands that make up the Japanese *archipelago* (group of islands) and the gods and goddesses of trees, mountains, and wind.

TIP

In these early stories of the earliest days of the world, there is not a clear distinction between people and gods.

Izanami's last child was the fire god, Kagutsuchi. Unfortunately, his birth burned Izanami so badly that she died, though she produced more gods and goddesses as she was dying. They emerged from her vomit, urine, and feces. Her husband, Izanagi, wept bitterly, and his tears turned into more deities. In a fit of anger, he cut off the fire god's head, and still more divinities arose from the dead god's remains.

Izanagi's trip to the underworld

Izanami descended to *Yomi*, the underworld. Izanagi decided to go see her and try to bring her back to life. Izanami met him at the entrance to Yomi, and Izanagi asked his wife to come back with him. She said she didn't think she could because she'd already eaten the food of the dead, but she'd discuss it with the other gods. She warned Izanagi not to look at her, and indeed he couldn't see her at all in the darkness.

But Izanagi couldn't stand the thought of not seeing his wife, so he lit a torch. Much to his dismay and disgust, he discovered she was a rotting corpse, writhing with maggots. Izanagi turned and ran.

Furious, Izanami sent the hags, scary old women that acted as her servants, along with some thunder gods and an army, to chase him. When Izanagi got to the pass that led back to the land of the living, he turned to throw three peaches at his pursuers. Izanami had turned into a demon. Just as she was about to reach him, he pushed a huge boulder over the pass, stopping her.

The two had a brief argument. Izanami claimed that her husband had sinned against Yomi, and she promised to kill people out in the world. Izanagi replied that for every 1,000 she killed he'd bear 1,500 more. And that was the end of their close relationship.

Men can have babies, too

Izanagi was understandably shaken by his experience in Yomi (see the preceding section), so he took a bath. He went to a stream on the island of Kyushu and took off his clothes. A number of new gods and goddesses emerged from his discarded clothing, and others arose as he bathed. The last three to be born were Amaterasu, the sun goddess (from his left eye), Tsuki-yomi, the moon god (from his right eye) and Susano, the ocean god, who came out of his nose.

The sun goddess Amaterasu was one of the most important Japanese deities. The imperial family considered her their ancestor until after World War II, when they relinquished their divine status. The most important Shinto shrine in Japan is dedicated to her; it has stood in exactly same place in Mie Prefecture since the seventh century, and it gets rebuilt every 20 years.

Sibling rivalry between the sun and ocean

The sun goddess and moon god were happy to do the jobs they had been assigned. Susano, though, said he didn't want to rule the ocean but instead wanted to go be with his mother, Izanami, in the underworld. (Flip to the earlier section "The first

gods and the first people" for more on that.) Izanagi banished him and then retired to heaven.

But brothers and sisters should love one another!

Amaterasu got the idea that Susano wanted to take her possessions away from her, so she prepared for battle. Susano suggested to Amaterasu that they prove which of them was mightier by seeing who could produce some male deities. Amaterasu broke Susano's sword into three pieces, chewed them up, and spat out three goddesses. Susano turned Amaterasu's necklaces and bracelets into five male gods. He declared himself the winner, but Amaterasu refused to concede, claiming she was the winner because the gods had come from her possessions.

Susano replied by breaking up Amaterasu's rice fields, covering her irrigation ditches, and strewing his excrement in the hall where people celebrated the harvest. Then he threw a heavenly pony through the roof of the hall where Amaterasu and her maids were weaving. One of the maids was so frightened that she hit her genitals on the shuttle of her loom and died. Amaterasu ran away and hid in the Heavenly Rock Cave.

The sun goddess goes on strike

Amaterasu's flight (see the preceding section) created a problem for the whole world. The sun didn't rise, and everything was plunged into total darkness. So the gods got together to discuss how to get her out of hiding.

They came up with an elaborate plan to lure her out. They made a magical mirror and hung it from a tree. Then a young goddess called Ama-no-uzume did an erotic dance — while naked — on an upturned tub. The watching gods laughed uproariously, and Amaterasu peeked out of her cave to see what was going on. She asked why everyone was laughing, and Ama-no-uzume replied that they'd found a deity superior to the sun goddess.

While this conversation was going on, the other gods positioned the mirror so Amaterasu could see it. When she caught sight of her reflection, she left her cave and walked toward the mirror, captivated and curious who this goddess was. The other gods grabbed her and stretched a rope across the cave's entrance so she couldn't get back in.

Amaterasu apparently wasn't upset by this treatment. She went back to work running the sun, and life returned to normal. The other gods and goddesses punished Susano, whom they blamed for causing the crisis. They fined him; cut off his beard, fingernails, and toenails; and kicked him out of heaven.

Susano's new careers

Susano wandered the earth, intending to go to Yomi, but he never got there. Instead, he dabbled in heroics, cooking, and a bit of gardening. He was quite the renaissance god! He was also known for his awesomely long beard.

The hero always gets the girl

One day Susano came to the home of a family, where the father and mother were both crying. They told Susano a dragon had carried off their eight daughters and killed all but the youngest of them; she was a girl named Kushinada-hime. The dragon's name was Yamata-no-Orochi; it had eight heads and eight tails and was longer than eight mountains. Susano promised the couple he'd kill the dragon and save their last daughter.

Susano filled eight big jars with sake and put them in front of the dragon's house. Then he turned Kushinada-hime into a comb, put her in his hair, and hid in the woods. The dragon showed up and drank all the sake in the jars. It got drunk and nearly fell asleep.

Susano jumped out of the woods with his sword in his hand. He started to fight the first head, but the dragon's other heads only laughed at him. Susano was quick; soon the dragon's other heads had joined the fight, too, but Susano managed to cut them all off one by one. Then he cut off all the dragon's tails but one; that one had something in it that prevented Susano from cutting all the way through. He ripped the tail open and found a magical sword, which he later gave to his sister Amaterasu.

Susano and Kushinada-hime got married, and Susano composed the first *tanka* (a 31-syllable poem, similar to a haiku) to celebrate. The house where they lived is now the site of Suga Shrine in Izumo.

Susano has a culinary streak and gardening expo

Susano once killed the food goddess because he found her method of cooking disgusting: She vomited or otherwise excreted the food she served. Many kinds of food came out of the wounds he inflicted on her.

Susano also went to Korea to get seeds for different kinds of trees. He brought these back to Japan, planted them, and taught people how to use them for building.

The hero O-Kuninushi

One of Susano's descendants, a man named O-Kuninushi, was one of the great heroes of early Japan. He and his brothers shared many adventures.

The ol' white rabbit disguise

One day, O-Kuninushi and his brothers went on a quest to find a beautiful princess called Yagami-hime, whom the brothers wanted to marry. They made O-Kuninushi carry the bags and suitcases.

The unencumbered brothers were walking faster than O-Kuninushi. They came upon a rabbit with no fur and asked what had happened to it. The rabbit said it had lived on an island and wanted to cross the sea. The rabbit had come up with a clever ploy to get around the lack of a bridge: It found a crocodile and promised to count the members of its family.

The crocodiles lined up end to end across the water, and the rabbit hopped from back to back, pretending to count them. As it reached land, the rabbit muttered that the crocodiles were fools and that it'd just used them as a bridge. The last crocodile heard that and ripped the rabbit's fur off.

The brothers told the rabbit that it had been sinful, but if it bathed in seawater and sat in the sun, its fur would come back. That didn't work, and it proved pretty painful for the rabbit, too.

Then O-Kuninushi turned up, heard the same story, and gave the rabbit a different prescription: It should bathe in fresh water, cover its body with cattails, and lie in the grass in the shade of a tree. This suggestion worked, and the rabbit got its white fur back.

You can choose your friends but not your family

After the rabbit episode in the preceding section, the brothers arrived at princess Yagami-hime's home. The princess said she'd heard the story about the white rabbit and wanted to marry O-Kuninushi, not any of them. And she did.

The angry brothers took O-Kuninushi hunting with them. Seeking revenge, they hurled a flaming rock toward him, and he was badly burned. The white rabbit went running for O-Kuninushi's mother. She got two shellfish goddesses to put powdered shells on O-Kuninushi and saved his life.

The brothers tried once more to kill O-Kuninushi, catching him in a snare, but his mother saved him again. She told O-Kuninushi that he needed to get away from his brothers.

O-Kuninushi visits Susano: Not exactly a luxury suite

O-Kuninushi went to visit Susano at his palace. Susano's daughter, Suseri-hime, greeted him at the door, and the two fell in love instantly.

Less than thrilled with his visitor, Susano decided to test O-Kuninushi. Susano made O-Kuninushi sleep in a room full of snakes. Suseri-hime gave him a snake-repelling scarf, and he passed the night safely. The next night Susano put O-Kuninushi in a room filled with centipedes and bees; another scarf did the trick.

Susano then shot an arrow into a field, sent O-Kuninushi to retrieve it, and set the field on fire. A little mouse saved O-Kuninushi by taking him to an underground cavern. After the fire went out, the mouse brought O-Kuninushi the arrow, which he presented to Susano.

Susano came up with one more trial. He told O-Kuninushi to stand behind him and pick the lice and centipedes out of his hair. Suseri-hime gave O-Kuninushi a bowl of nuts and clay, which he chewed and spit out as if he were chomping up centipedes. Susano fell asleep under this treatment.

Seizing his opportunity, O-Kuninushi tied Susano's hair to the rafters and ran away with Suseri-hime on his back, taking along Susano's sword and bow. Susano woke up and pursued the couple but gave up after a bit. Instead of chasing them, he called out to O-Kuninushi that he'd be able to defeat his evil brothers if he used Susano's sword and bow.

O-Kuninushi brought Suseri-hime home and installed her as his first wife, ahead of Yagami-hime (see the preceding section). Yagami-hime left in a huff, abandoning his baby in the fork of a tree. O-Kuninushi fought his tormenting siblings with Susano's weapons and finally rid himself of them.

Supernatural Beings and Folk Tales

Shinto mixed with traditional Japanese religion to produce a body of tales featuring various supernatural beings and occurrences. Other stories involve real historical figures who gained mythical status. The stories are fun, because they involve demons, ghosts, a "peach-boy," and some fun animals.

Bird ladies from heaven

In a number of stories, beautiful heavenly women wearing robes of feathers fly down to earth. The robes *(hagoromo)* are the key to the goddesses' immortality.

In the traditional story, a group of goddesses descend from heaven for an outing in the world. They take off their robes and leave them hanging on bushes while they swim in a stream. A man walks by and takes one of the robes. When the women see him, they all jump out of the water, put on their robes, and fly back to heaven — all except the one whose robe was taken. She has to stay on earth and marry the man who has her clothes. She has a child with him but eventually manages to get back to her heavenly home.

Devils and peaches

Oni were Japanese devils or demons, a type of Kami. They had horns on their heads and *cloven* (split) feet. They seemed scary, but they weren't very smart. Sort of like the Oni were the *Tengu*, another kind of Kami. The Tengu sometimes looked like birds of prey and sometimes like monkeys. Oni and Tengu feature in a lot of stories.

Cutting a rug with the local devils

In one famous story, an old man has a lump on his right cheek. He's tried to get rid of it, but nothing has worked, and the lump has only grown bigger.

One night, this old man comes upon a group of oni dancing around the forest, and he joins in with the festivities. Delighted with the old man's dancing, the devils make him promise to return the next night. They pluck the lump from his cheek as a bond; they don't realize he doesn't value it, so they think he'll come back to reclaim it. The old man returns home with a smooth face and tells the story of how he had lost his lump.

Another old man has a similar lump on his left cheek. This old man decides to go dance with the oni the next night to see whether they'll take his off, too. But he isn't nearly as good a dancer as the first old man. Disappointed in his performance, the oni give him the other man's lump and tell him not to come back. Now he has big lumps on both cheeks.

Momotaro, the Peach Boy

Momotaro, the Peach Boy, was a famous hero who fought oni. He came out of a peach — an old woman found a peach floating in a stream, took it home, and found a small boy inside it. When Momotaro grew up, he went off to invade the island of the devils. His mother packed him a bunch of dumplings for snacks along the way. As he walked, he met a dog, a monkey, and a pheasant who joined him in return for dumplings. The group attacked and defeated the devils together, and Momotaro returned home with a lot of treasure.

Earthbound ghosts: Boo!

Japanese folk tales are full of ghosts that walk the earth in various forms. Some are angry and vengeful while others are more benign, but seeing one is always unnerving. Figure 23-1 shows a mask of a ghost. Japanese ghost stories aren't like European or American ghost stories. Often, they feature a set-up leading to a single, unsettling moment, with no explanation and no follow-up.

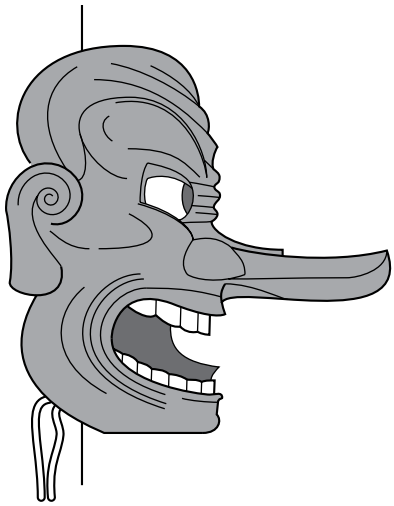

FIGURE 23-1: A mask of a Tengu, a ghost who lives in the mountains.

In the story *Mujina,* a man walking in Tokyo at night comes upon a young woman weeping with her back to him. He puts his hand on her shoulder and asks her what's wrong. She turns to him, and he sees her face is completely blank and smooth, just like an egg.

The man runs into the darkness, toward the lantern of a noodle-seller's cart. The salesman asks the man why he's running so fast, and the man says, "I saw a woman with a face like . . . like . . ." The salesman says, "Was it like this?" and turns his face into the light. The salesman's face is completely blank and smooth, just like an egg. At that moment, the light goes out.

Mythical beasts and creatures

Foxes and cats both have magical powers in Japanese myths; both can turn themselves into humans, and foxes specialize in being seductresses. An animal called a *tanuki,* similar to a badger but often called a "raccoon dog" in English, also appears in a number of myths and folktales. Tanuki love to get drunk and have loud parties. In statues and paintings, they often have jugs of sake and big genitals to go along with their leering expressions.

7

“New World”? Says Who? Mythology of the Americas

IN THIS PART . . .

Appreciate the mythology of Central and South America: The Olmecs, Toltecs, Maya, and Aztecs, and their warlike gods and heroes.

Explore the mythologies of the peoples of North America, from the Iroquois Confederation in the northeast to the wealthy groups in the Pacific Northwest, the buffalo hunters of the Great Plains, and the great desert cities of the Southwest.

IN THIS CHAPTER

- Checking out the old Mesoamerican cultures
- Meeting the Maya
- Addressing the Aztecs
- Investigating the Incas

Chapter 24

Central and South American Mythology: Civilizations, Cities, and Ball Games

People lived in Central and South America long before the Europeans arrived. They had complex societies and large cities and occupied themselves with their own affairs: pleasing their gods with offerings of blood, plotting the planets' courses, maintaining a calendar, and conquering neighboring nations. This existence all came to an abrupt end in the early 1500s CE when the Spanish arrived and conquered the empires of the era, the Aztec and the Inca.

TIP

Mesoamerica is a fancy word for the region including Mexico, Guatemala, Belize, Honduras, and Nicaragua. It's more or less the same region as *Central America*, which encompasses Mexico through Panama.

Historians get their evidence about historical Latin American Indians from a variety of sources: from documents the people wrote themselves in languages like Ki'che', Nawat or Nahuatl, and Ixil, from records Spanish colonists wrote in

Spanish and Latin, ethnographic observations of modern indigenous people in Central and South America, and archaeological remains. The stories of the Aztecs and the Incas, in particular, illustrate how mythology can be important in daily life and indeed in the lives of empires. Both of these huge civilizations fell because of peoples' beliefs in the gods.

In this chapter, we spotlight the stories, gods, and traditions that make up the mythology of some major players in Central and South America. We take you back to some civilizations that predate the more well-known Aztecs and Maya, such as the Olmecs, the great city of Teotihuacan, and the Toltecs, who built an empire in what is now central Mexico. We also give you highlights of later Mesoamerican cultures, including the Maya (whose descendants still maintain a cultural identity today), and the Aztecs, who knew how to please the gods and make the corn grow, and whose civilization was first interrupted and then destroyed when the Spanish came to the shores of America.

Footprints of a Lost People: The Old Cultures

Central America was home to a number of cultures during the many centuries before Europeans arrived.

Mexico and the surrounding area were the site of several successive civilizations. The major Mesoamerican cultures were

- **Olmec:** 1500 to 400 BCE
- **Zapotec:** 500 BCE to 700 CE
- **Teotihuacan:** 150 BCE to 750 CE
- **Maya:** 250 to 900 CE
- **Toltec:** 900 to 1180 CE
- **Aztec:** 1325 to 1521 CE

These cultures spoke a bunch of languages, and each language had many dialects. Of those that survive today, among communities that keep up their culture that dates from before the Spanish came, the two main ones are K'iche' (the language of the Mayan creation epic *Popul Vuh*), and Nahuatl, which was briefly the official language of Central America, according to a decree in 1570 from the Spanish King Philip II.

But across these many cultures and languages, the people of Central and South America shared many cultural attributes, such as a very complicated calendar system. Many of the same gods appear in all their pantheons. (A *pantheon* is the set of gods a people recognize and believe in).

REMEMBER

Modern people are more familiar with the Maya and the Aztecs because they lived more recently and some of them still are around today. However, their predecessors in that area also had significant civilizations. The Olmecs, the Toltecs, and other cultures had elaborate groups of deities and rituals that passed from culture to culture; thus, the relatively modern Aztecs still were worshipping gods that had been around thousands of years earlier. The city of Teotihuacan was home to a vast civilization and, since its decline, has been informative to subsequent cultures; both the Aztecs and modern archaeologists have marveled at it.

Olmecs

The Olmecs were an early Central American civilization, and a major force in cultural development of the whole region going forward in history. The Olmecs rose on the Mexican Gulf Coast around 1500 BCE, and their empire lasted until 400 BCE.

The Olmecs imposed one government and one religion on the whole region. They may have begun keeping a calendar like later peoples did. Famous Olmec archaeological sites include San Lorenzo, with giant stone heads, and the ceremonial site La Venta.

We don't always know by what names the Olmecs called their gods, so scholars have to use descriptions like "The Rain God." The Rain God was their most important deity. This god is a monster with human and jaguar features on his face. Carvings of him look sort of like a cross between a jaguar and a baby. Later civilizations also used this god, along with many other Olmec gods.

Teotihuacan

Teotihuacan, the first major city in the Western Hemisphere, was located near present-day Mexico City. In its heyday, Teotihuacan was almost the size of Rome and flourished for a longer time, from about 150 BCE to 750 CE. The Aztecs knew about it; they called it the Place of the Gods.

The city was laid out according to the movements of the stars and the position of nearby mountains. The Street of the Dead (named by the Aztecs) angled east from true north to point to a sacred mountain. The main east-west axis of the town lined up with the *Pleiades*, a cluster of stars important to the Mesoamerican calendar. The city had giant pyramids; under one of them is a cave that may have been

used for secret rituals. Archaeologists have found skeletons of several soldiers wearing necklaces of human skulls, their hands tied behind their backs — human sacrifices, perhaps?

The locals worshipped the Storm God; paintings of this fanged, bug-eyed god with his trademark lightning bolt are all around the site. The people believed he could make summer clouds release rain to grow corn, beans, peppers, squash, and grain. He's also a war god; other paintings depict scenes of war and human sacrifice, including a procession of soldiers carrying knives with human hearts stuck on them. The Storm God's counterpart is a goddess who's sometimes helpful and sometimes fierce.

Other than the evidence archaeologists have assembled, historians know little about the people who lived in Teotihuacan. There is disagreement among scholars even about what ethnic group they belonged to. No one knows where they came from, how their society worked, what language they spoke, or why they disappeared. But they do know the culture was influential because many images from Teotihuacan appear at the sites of later Mesoamerican cultures.

Toltecs

The Toltecs lived in central Mexico from 900 to 1180 CE. The Toltecs had a number of small states bound in an empire; they were known for their military prowess and had military orders named after animals, such as the Coyote, the Jaguar, and the Eagle, that showed up later in Mayan culture. They supposedly sacked the city of Teotihuacan (see the preceding section) around 900 CE and were themselves invaded in the 12th century CE. Their conquerors included the Mexicas, who became the Aztecs. (Head to the "Aztecs" section later in this chapter.)

Quetzalcoatl, the feathered snake (or a real guy?)

Quetzalcoatl, the feathered serpent, is the most important figure in Mesoamerican mythology. He appears on the most ancient monuments over hundreds of years, and even today, Mexicans use him as a symbol of their culture. He may have been a real person, the Toltec priest-king Topiltzin-Quetzalcoatl. The Toltec king Topiltzin introduced the cult of Quetzalcoatl and called himself by that name. (A *cult* in this context is a specific set of religious practices in honor of one particular god.)

When he appears in art, the figure of Quetzalcoatl is tall and strong. His face is often covered with soot, and he wears a quetzal bird on his back. He sometimes appeares as the wind god Ehecatl.

Also appearing at the Sky Club as the planet Venus

According to the Toltecs, Quetzalcoatl (whom we discuss the preceding section) had an argument with the god of night, Tezcatlipoca. Tezcatlipoca liked bloody sacrifices of humans, but Quetzalcoatl preferred more peaceful offerings, like jade or butterflies. Quetzalcoatl lost the fight, went to the Gulf of Mexico, and burned himself up on a pyre. He was reborn as the planet Venus, visible as the Morning and Evening Stars.

In another version of the story, the Toltec priest-king Topiltzin sailed away on the Gulf of Mexico, promising to return one day from the direction of the rising sun. The Aztecs assimilated Topiltzin as a god, associating him with the feather-serpent-god Quetzalcoatl under the name Cē Ācatl Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl; they made him patron of priests and craftsmen and credited him with inventing the calendar. The Aztecs calculated the predicted date of his return as 1519 CE. That was the exact year that Hernán Cortés and his men arrived in the Yucatán. Cortés exploited the mythological advantage over the folks he planned to conquer, an advantage that had dropped into his lap (check out the section "What a coincidence: Mythology, Moctezuma, and the conquistadors" later in the chapter).

Mesoamerican people loved a bird called the *quetzal.* They're beautiful iridescent green birds with incredibly long and very valuable tail feathers. South American Indians trapped them to get their feathers. Killing one, however, was punishable by death. Few quetzals are left in Central America, and they're highly endangered. The Guatemalan unit of currency is called the quetzal.

Maya

Mayan civilization traces its roots back to 8,000 BCE, with a heyday from 250 to 900 CE. The final remnants of a Mayan political state was defeated by the Spanish in 1697. Their empire once stretched from hills in Guatemala, Mexico, and Honduras through Belize and across the Yucatán Peninsula. Mayan rulers, who believed they were descended from the sun, oversaw a society of farmers, craftsmen, and scholars. The Maya had several regional capitals; important ones included Tikal, Cobá, and Copán. Even after being defeated by the Spanish, the Maya didn't give up their identity or their culture, but retain it, and their K'iche' language (the second-most spoken language in Central and South America) today.

At the peak of the Mayan civilization, as many as 2 million Maya may have been living in Guatemala. The Mayan civilization declined rapidly after 900 CE; no one knows why. Though Maya continued to live in the area, by the time the Spanish

arrived they were no longer a great civilization, instead living in small farming villages and practicing the religion of their ancestors.

Torture and human sacrifice were key parts of the Mayan religious rituals. Maya feared the world would end if the gods didn't get human blood regularly. That also meant the Mayan rulers periodically had to give the gods some of their own blood (which must have been lots of fun).

The interrupted creation of people

The Maya recorded their creation story and other mythology in a book called *Popol Vuh.* In the Mayan creation story, the gods spent a while creating humans. They weren't pleased with their first attempt, so the gods sent a flood to destroy the human and turned the survivors into monkeys. Before the gods got a chance to try again, an imposter god called Vucub-Caquix entered the scene.

TIP

If it seems that every culture's mythology includes a story about a vast flood that kills (almost) everybody, you're right! The Maya, Greeks, Romans, ancient Israelites, Babylonians, and Assyrians all had their own versions of a very similar story. We talk about these flood-myths and their possible historical origins in Chapter 17.

Vucub-Caquix claimed to be the sun and the moon. The gods knew they couldn't finish humans until Vucub-Caquix had gone away, so they gave the divine twins Hunapú (god of the hunt) and Ixbalanqué (Little Jaguar) the job of getting rid of him. The twins knew that Vucub-Caquix would come to a fruit tree to eat, so they hid under it and shot him with an arrow. Vucub-Caquix tore off one of Hunapú's arms and ran away with it. The twins got an old man and woman to help them get the arm back. The old people found Vucub-Caquix and offered to help him. He said his eyes and teeth hurt, so the old couple pulled out his teeth and gouged out his eyes. After that, they took back Hunapú's arm and reattached it.

With the monster vanquished, the twins decided to avenge their father's death. The twins are the sons of Hun Hunapú. His name means "One Hunapú," to distinguish him from his brother Vucub Hunapú, "Seven Hunapú." Hun Hunapú had been lured to *Xibalba* (the underworld) to play ball with the gods who lived there, *the Lords of Xibalba.* He lost the ball game and, as a penalty, had his head cut off. The Lords of Xibalba hung Hun Hunapú's head on a calabash tree to warn everyone not to mess with the Lords of Xibalba. This tree miraculously became covered with fruit. A young woman went to see it and had a conversation with the skull; the head spat in her hand, and she became pregnant with the twins Hunapú and Ixbalanqué.

The now-grown twins journeyed to the underworld, where the lords of Xibalba subjected them to various trials. First, they had to play the dreaded ball-game

(and we know the consequences of losing a ball game!). They won the game, but then had to survive nights in the house of knives, the house of cold, the house of jaguars, and the house of fire. In the house of bats, however, they weren't so fortunate. Hunapú lost his head, and the lords of Xibalba hung it in their ball court. Conveniently for Hunapú, a turtle volunteered to be a replacement head.

The brothers now played another ball game with the Lords of Xibalba but came up with a plan to win. They threw the ball to the end of the court, and a rabbit ran after it; while the Lords of Xibalba were chasing the rabbit, Ixbalanqué stole back Hunapú's head. The game ended in a tie.

Now the Lords of Xibalba, fed up with their opponents, built a bonfire and suggested they all fly over the flames. But the twins knew they were immortal, and they jumped right in. Five days later they rose from the fire and came back to visit their enemies disguised as fishermen. They put on a show, cutting themselves to pieces and putting themselves back together. Then they did the same trick on the Lords of Xibalba, except they didn't put them back together again. The rest of the inhabitants of Xibalba surrendered, and the brothers punished them by (among other things) forbidding them to play ball.

Meanwhile, since Vucub-Caquix had been dealt with, the gods got back to finishing humans. The gods wanted to create beings that looked like them, and they hatched various schemes for doing this. They made human beings out of mud, but when it rained, their creations crumbled away. Another attempt to make the human race out of wood seemed to succeed, but evidently wood can't contain a soul, so these creatures quickly stopped being loyal to their creators. The disappointed gods destroyed them by sending a lot of rain and letting their wooden-creatures rot.

REMEMBER

Finally, they enlisted the cat (or jaguar), the coyote, the parrot, and the crow to gather up a bunch of corn (*maize*), and they made human beings out of that. This creation myth explains why humans need to keep eating corn to stay alive.

Multifaceted deities: The gods and their business

The Maya had a bewildering array of deities. The Mayan pantheon was complicated — most deities had four guises, one for each direction, and often they also had dual natures, being both young and old, male and female, and so on. Here are a few of the better-known ones:

- **Itzamná:** The creator and patron of knowledge.
- **Cizin:** The death god. He rules the underworld.

- **Ah Kin:** He's the sun; he may have been an aspect of Itzamná. In the sky, he's just the sun, who can bring warmth or drought; in the underworld, he's a jaguar. The Sun god was the center of the Mayan universe. Rulers claimed to be descended from him, which justified their power over everyone else.
- **Ix Chel:** She's the moon goddess and Ah Kin's or Itzamná's consort. She's in charge of weaving, divination, childbirth, and medicine.
- **Venus:** A dangerous god, especially when he rises in the morning as the Morning Star.

Gods of corn and rain and patron gods for occupations and social groups were part of Mayan culture. All the deities together take care of human affairs.

REMEMBER

Figuring out who's who is complicated because of the differences in Mayan paintings of deities and the Europeans' descriptions of them.

Reptilian universe: The world where they lived

The Maya envisioned the universe as a united whole with all things intertwined within it — the heavens, the earth, the underworld, and everything in them. The deities in the Mayan pantheon and the many minor spirits (see the preceding section) each had their own place in the universe, though they all moved around constantly.

The Mayan world had four corners, with trees holding up the four corners of the heavens. Each quarter had a special color and particular gods associated with it. The heavens had 13 layers. The sky was a two-headed dragon whose body bore the symbols of the sun, the moon, the planet Venus, and the stars. The earth was the back of a giant lizard floating in a pond. People entered the underworld through this lizard's mouth; the underworld had nine levels.

Aztecs

The name Aztec came from the word *Aztlán*, meaning "White Land," which probably meant northern Mexico, their likely place origin. Their ancestors, the Mexica, probably started out as hunter-gatherers on the northern plateau and moved south around the same time as the Toltec civilization collapsed in the late 12th century CE. (You can read about them in the earlier section "Toltecs.") The Toltecs experienced major social, political, and religious upheavals around this time, which left them vulnerable to attack by their various enemies. The Aztecs joined in the fray when they arrived in the area.

The Aztec Empire lasted almost exactly 200 years. By the year 1325, they had founded the capital of the Aztec Empire, Tenochtitlán. They allied themselves with some neighbors and conquered others, so that by 1519 there were about 6 million Aztecs. This was when the Spanish soldier Hernán Cortés arrived in Mexico.

Cortés came to Mexico, the land of the Aztecs, from Cuba with 11 ships and 500 soldiers (some of them free men and some enslaved men, but all experienced in battle). Cortés himself didn't have a lot of experience, but he was able to win some battles on the coast, and then marched against the empire of King Moctezuma II. The Spanish acquired local allies, including 1,000 soldiers from Tlaxcalteca. By January of 1521, Moctezuma was dead, and Cortés was effectively the ruler of Mexico.

TECHNICAL STUFF

The name "Mexica" was applied to the city that grew up on the Aztec capital. Later it became the name for the entire country of Mexico.

Before its collapse, the Aztec civilization was alive with fervent worship of volatile gods, tales of magic and adventures, and unique traditions. In this section, we look at the Aztec view of the world, some of their gods, and how their religion and mythology played out in daily life.

The world under the fifth sun

The Aztecs (and the Maya, whom we discuss earlier in the chapter) believed that the current sun is the fifth sun. The four previous suns, and the people who lived under them, died long ago. The people who lived under the first sun were eaten by *ocelots* (a kind of cat). The second sun was the sun of air; the humans who lived then turned into monkeys. The inhabitants under number three, the sun of fire, all died except for the birds, which flew away. Fish came into existence under the fourth, the sun of water, but everyone else died in a flood. With the fifth sun, the elements of creation became integrated, but that was no assurance that this world would last any longer than the others; it, too, could die.

Gods for rain, corn, and sacrifices

The Aztecs had a huge number of deities. A bunch of them had to do with agriculture and rain. Aztec deities included the following:

- **Tezcatlipoca, the Lord of the Smoking Mirror:** He's the head of the pantheon of gods. He came to the Aztecs from the Toltecs (see the "Toltecs" section earlier in the chapter). The Toltecs thought he corrupted Quetzalcoatl (the feathered serpent god whose worship was very ancient in the Americas),

making him get drunk. The Aztecs had a bunch of different identities for him. He's associated with war, death, darkness, royalty, and sorcerers. His alter ego is the jaguar.

- **Huītzilōpōchtli, sometimes called the Hummingbird of the South:** He's the Aztec god of sun and war; he doesn't appear in any other Mesoamerican mythologies. He helped the Aztecs choose the site for Tenochtitlán.
- **Tlaloc:** He's an ancient rain god. People throughout Mesoamerica worshipped him — he got the majority of sacrifices.
- **Chalchiuhtlicue:** Tlaloc's wife, she's the Lady of the Jade Skirt. She can stir up hurricanes and make people drown.

  The Tlaoques: They're Tlaloc's helpers; they make thunder by smashing their water jars.
- **Xipe Totec:** He's the god of springtime, seeds, and planting. He's known as the "flayed god," and in many statues he wears the skin of a sacrificial victim. His priests would skin their human sacrifices and wear the skins themselves. This act made a direct connection between human sacrifice and fertility of the land, because these people were sacrificed to the god to make springtime come and the plants grow.
- **Ehecatl:** He's the wind god. His temples are cylindrical to offer less resistance to the wind from any direction.

Aztec festivals and traditions

The Aztecs were a warlike people. They sent armies throughout the countryside, conquering the locals and forcing them to contribute goods and captives for their sacrifices. The most successful Aztecs were generally the most successful warriors. They also had a very efficient farming and irrigation system and produced enough food to create a rich nation.

Blood for the good of the gods: Human sacrifice

The Aztecs believed their gods needed human blood and lives to stay happy. They thought they were the chosen people of Huītzilōpōchtli, the war god, and their mission was to give him blood to keep the sun in motion. Huītzilōpōchtli was greedy; one year, his priests sacrificed more than 20,000 people to him.

The Aztecs sacrificed humans by cutting their hearts out with flint or obsidian knives (*obsidian* is an extremely sharp volcanic glass). They burned the hearts and threw the bodies onto an image of one of Huītzilōpōchtli's defeated victims. Aztec priests offered their own blood to the god, too. They'd pull barbed cords through holes in their tongues, which must have been really gory and painful.

The calendar cycle festival

The Aztec religion incorporated aspects of most other area religions, including those of the Toltec (see the "Toltecs" section earlier in the chapter), Olmec (see the "Olmecs" section earlier in the chapter), and Mayan civilizations (see the "Maya" section earlier in the chapter). In particular, they used the same calendar system as the Maya, scheduling their rituals by its 52-year cycle.

Every 52 years, the people would hold a major festival to mark the end of one long cycle and the beginning of another. They put out all the fires in the land, threw statues of gods into the water, and swept their houses clean. They'd then set a captive's chest on fire; if the flames didn't burn high enough, that signaled a prediction that the world would end. The men locked up the women and children and put masks on them; they kept the children awake all night lest they turn into mice.

When the sun rose again, everyone rejoiced. They pricked their ears to get blood for the sacred fire, put on new clothes, redecorated their houses, and offered sacrifices to the gods. At noon they sacrificed some more captives.

What a coincidence: Mythology, Moctezuma, and the conquistadors

The Aztecs still were building their empire when the Spanish *conquistador* (the Spanish word for "explorer and conqueror") Hernán Cortés and his soldiers arrived in arrived in 1519 CE. Moctezuma was emperor of the Aztecs. Although he was a successful king and led many wars of conquest to expand the empire and capture prisoners to satisfy his favorite god Huītzilōpōchtli's craving for blood, he supposedly had a fatalistic view of life. His astrologers had predicted an uncertain future for him, which was enhanced by his expectation that the feather serpent Cē Ācatl Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl (a form of the feather-serpent god Quetzalcoatl) would return during his lifetime in the form of a white bearded man who would take over the empire.

What happened was a tragic example of how seriously Moctezuma took his people's mythology. When Hernán Cortés arrived with his white beard, Moctezuma initially thought that Cē Ācatl Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl had finally returned, as the myth indicated he would (see the earlier section "Also appearing at the Sky Club as the planet Venus" for the rest of that story). Moctezuma initially welcomed Cortés and offered him gifts to win his favor. Later, as Moctezuma began to suspect that this Spanish conquistador wasn't actually Topiltzin, he still delayed acting against the Spanish, preferring to wait and see what developed. But soon it was too late. Moctezuma was killed — some say he was murdered by the Spanish; others say he was killed by his own people for letting the Spanish into the kingdom — and in 1521, the Spanish captured the capital Tenochtitlán, and that was the end of the Aztec empire.

Incas

The Incas, another well-known group of Latin American Indians, didn't live in Mesoamerica. Their civilization was a separate culture in the Andes Mountains of South America. The Inca Empire lasted only about 100 years, from 1438 to 1532, getting cut short by the Spanish conquest. But in that time, it managed to stretch 2,500 miles through the Andes Mountains down the Pacific coast of South America from Ecuador to central Chile. The Incas started as a small group in Cuzco, Peru, but extended their influence over 12 million people, who came from at least 100 different cultures and spoke many different languages.

REMEMBER

The Incas left no written records; their historians memorized facts and passed their knowledge down orally. But the Spanish wrote many long documents about them and their culture at the time of the conquest, so some written information about the Incas is available to scholars via their conquerors.

Sun, moon, stars, and people

The Incas believed particular places were especially spiritual. The tops of mountain passes were especially important to them, and people would make little offerings to local deities before continuing on their way. They had other, more formal, gods, too — the rulers claimed to be descendants from the Sun God, one of their main gods. In Inca mythology, the heavenly bodies came into being *after* human beings were created.

The creator god and the divine ancestors of the Incas

Viracocha was the creator god. He didn't concern himself much with the everyday lives of humans, preferring to let other deities worry about that. The Incas believed that he'd traveled through the world teaching people how to live. When the Spanish arrived in 1532, some Incas thought they were Viracocha returned for another visit.

As is common in creation stories around the world, Viracocha didn't like his first attempt at creating humans and destroyed them with a flood. After he made a batch he liked, he sent them into the world. To light the world for his new creations, he went to an island in the middle of Lake Titicaca, and there he called the Sun, Moon, and Stars to come out of the lake and fill the heavens. Because of that, the island was known as the Island of the Sun.

Our claim to fame

Viracocha gave Manco Capac, the leader of the Incas, a headdress and a battle-ax to confirm his royal status. Manco Capac founded the city of Cuzco, and the Incas later built their Temple of the Sun on the exact spot where he stood. He married his sister, and they jumpstarted the Inca dynasty. The Inca rulers used this story to claim divine origins.

Skybound: The Inca deities

The sky and its changes were very important to the Incas, and their many deities reflect that. Some important ones included these:

- **Inti:** He's the sun god.
- **Mama Kilya:** The moon goddess, the wife of Inti, and mother of the Inca people. She regulates the passage of time.
- **Ilyap'a:** The god of rain. He takes water from the Milky Way, which the Inca thought to be a river across the sky. His sister keeps the water in a jug, and when Ilyap wants to let some out as rain, he smashes the jug with a lightning bolt.
- **Cuicha:** He's the god of the rainbow.

Children of the sun: Inca culture

As the Incas conquered groups of people, they forced their subject peoples to move around and settle in different places; splitting up ethnic groups helped prevent rebellion. They allowed local leaders to keep their positions and let people keep their old religions with some Inca rituals mixed in.

Sun worship throughout the empire

Sun worship was the official state religion; the sun god's name is Inti. The Temple of the Sun in Cuzco had walls of gold; its garden was full of statues of animals cased in gold and silver. Several thousand women called the *Virgins of the Sun*, or the Chosen Women, lived in Cuzco, serving both Inti and the royal family. They were chosen for their beauty and skill at weaving and taken from their villages when they were about 8 years old. They made clothes, food, and beer for festivals and slept with the emperor when he wished it.

Human sacrifice for the good of the empire

As part of their empire-building, the Incas selected children from everywhere in the empire and sacrificed them on mountaintops. This fate wasn't as bad as it sounds; people considered having their kids chosen an honor, so the practice was good for building ties with subject nations. They believed that these sacrificed children became deities themselves.

The children were dressed in the finest clothes and most expensive jewelry; they served as gifts for and messengers to the gods. They were killed by being buried alive, strangled, or hit on the head. They don't appear to have suffered much, which leads historians to believe that they were drugged with ritual alcoholic drinks and befuddled by the high altitude.

Archaeologists have found some remarkably preserved mummies up in the Andes mountains. The mummies are bodies of children buried in pots and preserved by the dry conditions up in the high mountains. These children were buried wearing elegant clothing, seemingly the victims of the Inca sacrifices to their gods.

IN THIS CHAPTER

- Seeking help from Little Turtle, Heng, and Rabbit in Eastern North America
- Wrangling buffalo in the Great Plains
- Worshipping in the Pueblos of the Southwest
- Living among fish and bears in the Pacific Northwest

Chapter 25

Sea to Sea, and Lots of Animals in Between: Indigenous Myths of North America

Various groups of people arrived in North America over many centuries, starting, perhaps, as early as 20,000 years ago. Most scholars agree that the earliest people came to the continent from Asia where modern-day Alaska comes close to the eastern coast of Russia (at the end of the Ice Age, that little bit of water was dry land). They spread all over the continent and moved down into Central and South America and adapted to the places where they settled. In subsequent centuries, some people migrated back up into North America from the south. So by, say, 6,000 years ago, North America was home to a diversity of cultures, each with a long history. And, of course, each of these cultures came up with myths.

Myths were sacred to these indigenous people of North American because myths explained the relationship between humans and the gods. *Creation myths* (myths about the forming of the world) were especially important, as were myths that explained the origins of *rituals* (repeated religious practices to show respect for gods and spirits and to ask for their favor). Many groups acknowledged a supreme spiritual being or Great Spirit. The spirits of ancestors helped the living and needed rituals. Other figures such as the Sun and Moon, Mother Earth and Father Sky, and creator/trickster animals such as Coyote frequently appeared in myths, as did other animal characters. It all added up to a complex set of beliefs.

North American Indians transmitted these myths orally — they memorized them and spoke them aloud instead of writing them down. The oral tradition of storytelling (which we cover in Chapter 1) is very important to all indigenous people of North America.

In this chapter, we look at the myths from some of the larger nations of North America before the arrival of Europeans. We start with the people who lived along the east coast, the Iroquois, the Huron, and the Delaware. The tribes of the American Southeast, the Cherokee, Choctaw, Creek, Chickasaw, and Seminole, shared many myths in common, including the discovery of tobacco. The peoples of the American Great Plains, whose way of life changed dramatically after Europeans brought horses to the region, tell a lot of myths about hunting and the guidance they receive from the Great Spirit. The Zuni and Hopi peoples of the southwest built large cities tucked into cliffs and revered their ancestors as gods. The Navajo and Apache people of the southeast were hunters, and their mythology often features the cunning tricks of the coyote. We also take you to the Pacific Northwest, which was home to the Tlingit, Nez Perce, Kwakiutl, Coer d'Alene, and Makah people. Their mythology featured animals from the land and the sea.

The Lush Green Forests of the East

Hundreds of years ago, the eastern part of North America was covered with forests. People lived in these forests from northern Canada all the way to the southern tip of Florida. These North American Indians had pretty complex cultures for people still using Stone Age tools.

The term *Stone Age* refers to technology; Stone Age people make their tools out of stone, not metal. That doesn't necessarily mean they're primitive; as we mention, the North American Indians had very complex cultures. Their stone tools were so effective that they could feed and clothe themselves and still have ample time for mythmaking and storytelling.

Northeastern woodlands: The Iroquois and their beliefs

The area from the St. Lawrence River to Delaware Bay and west to the Great Lakes was home to farming tribes, including the

- Iroquois
- Huron
- Delaware

These groups were some of the first North American Indians to encounter Europeans. Most records of Iroquois and other myths come from accounts written by European missionaries, so scholars know very little about their culture and mythology before the English and French arrived.

The indigenous people of the North American Northeast recorded their tribal history in strings of beads called *wampum.* At tribal gatherings, the dignitaries in charge of the wampum would tell the stories associated with them. Wampum also served as a unit of exchange, both for trade and to maintain social and political balance by making and confirming alliances.

The Iroquois Confederation

The Iroquois built up a federation of five North American Indian nations including the Cayuga, Seneca, Oneida, Mohawk, and Onandaga. This confederation allowed them to farm and fight more efficiently. In its heyday, the Iroquois Confederation was the most powerful group of North American Indians east of the Mississippi River; it took control of the Northeast and kept it from the mid-1600s on. On one occasion, it even raided the Black Hills in the Dakotas just to collect some prisoners to sacrifice at festivals. Members also tortured and occasionally even ate their prisoners as part of their rituals.

The Iroquois said their dead went to a land far away; dead warriors went to the sky to become *Aurora Borealis,* or northern lights. According to some accounts, they believed in an All-Father similar to the Norse god Odin; this belief may have come from visits by Norse people to the Labrador coast of Canada in the 11th and 12th centuries. And they believed in an assortment of spirits that ran all natural phenomena, such as rivers, rain, seasons, and crop growth; many of their myths involve natural processes.

Domestic disputes between the sun and moon

In Iroquois myth, the sun and the moon are like husband and wife and quarrel just as married couples do. When the moon went down before her husband one day, he

grew angry and beat her. She went and hid in the dark. *Little Turtle* (a turtle with magical powers and a recurring character in Iroquois mythology) went looking for her and found her pining away for her husband; she'd shrunk down to a mere sliver of her former rotund self. Little Turtle put her back on her course around the world. She gradually grew round again, but when the sun passed her without a backward glance, she again wasted away to nothing. And so the waxing and waning cycle of the moon continues every month.

A thunderous family

The people of the Northeast said that Thunder lived in the sky; he was one of seven brothers and went by the name Heng. He showered blessings down on the people in the spring, but sometimes his children got out of control and brought destruction to the earth.

One of his brothers married a human woman. She'd earlier inadvertently married a man of the Serpent People. (These people looked human some of the time but had a tendency to turn into giant snakes.) When she discovered this about her husband, the woman ran away as fast as she could, with the snake pursuing her through the forest. Finally, she came to a lake where three handsome young men stood — Thunder and two of his brothers. Thunder threw his spear at the snake and killed it. The three young men brought the woman home with them. She married one of them and had a baby boy.

This boy had thunder power like his uncle, Thunder; by the time he was four, he could knock down trees with his toy arrows. His mother begged her husband and brother-in-law for permission to take him back to her family to show them how strong he was. Thunder was worried about what would happen if the kid shot people with his arrows but agreed to let them go.

The kid, now called Thunder Boy, enjoyed his visit, but the other little boys started teasing him because he wouldn't shoot his bow. Finally, he couldn't stand it anymore and shot an arrow at them. Fortunately, it missed the other boys and only set some trees on fire, but that was enough for Thunder. He swooped down, grabbed his nephew, and never let him go to earth again.

Southeastern woodlands: Stories of the Five Tribes

The southern United States from the Atlantic to the Mississippi was home to a huge, sophisticated population of North American Indians known as Mound Builders. As the Europeans settled, some tribes became extinct from disease, and their traditions were diluted. A few tribes adopted the ways of the invaders — the

Europeans, who didn't appreciate the thousands of years of civilization that had existed before their arrival — called these "The Five Civilized Tribes." At the cost of losing many of their own ways and traditions, these people were able to survive contact with Europeans and were better able to preserve some of their ancient ways of life and stories:

- Cherokee
- Choctaw
- Creek
- Chickasaw
- Seminole

Their interaction with the newcomers to their lands influenced their mythology. They incorporated folk tales from Europe, and stories from the enslaved Africans that came with the Europeans, into their traditional ones. Two of their myths are lighthearted accounts of how people got two of their most important possessions: fire and tobacco.

Rabbit steals fire

The first story features the character named Rabbit, who is perhaps the first rabbit. The Sky People (who aren't human) were about to celebrate the Green Corn Festival in their village square; by tradition, this was the only place fire was allowed. People didn't have fire, so they couldn't cook food or warm themselves. Rabbit thought that was wrong and decided to steal fire and give it to people. He came up with a trick: He made his hair stand on end so impressively that the Sky People made him leader of the dance. As he danced past the fire, he bent down low — so low that his hair caught on fire. He ran away with his prize.

The Sky People didn't want their fire to spread around, so they made it rain for four days. But Rabbit hid in a hollow tree, and his fire stayed lit. The first humans saw the fire and came running to light firebrands. After that they had fire in their homes, and those who had fire shared with those who didn't. Finally, the rains stopped, everyone was allowed to have fire, and people remembered Rabbit fondly for his generous deed.

The seeds of love and tobacco

One day, a young man and a young woman walking down a path in the forest were overcome with desire for each other. They lay down on the side of the path and had sex, which was so satisfactory they decided to get married.

Later on, the man went out hunting and revisited the site of their first union. He found a pretty flower with scented leaves — the tobacco plant — growing in the same place they'd made love. He took it back to his people, and they all decided to dry it and smoke it; they named the new plant "Where we came together." The elders decided that because the man and woman were so happy and peaceful when the flower was created, they'd smoke it at councils for promoting peace and friendship among tribes. And because of its origins, they believed thereafter that tobacco had both masculine and feminine energy.

Big Sky Country: Tales from the Great Plains

The people of the Plains in the central United States were, for many in the United States, the very image of the original inhabitants of North America. The Plains people were the ones who rode horses, hunted buffalo, wore feathers and headdresses on their heads, and lived in tipis. (*Tipis*, often spelled "teepees" or "tepees," were tents made of buffalo skin.) They belonged to tribes like

- Sioux
- Pawnee
- Blackfoot
- Cheyenne
- Comanche
- Lakota
- Kiowa

The Plains people didn't really live that way for very long, though. They didn't have horses until the Spanish brought them around 1600, and their way of life was pretty much destroyed when European settlement expanded westward during the 1800s.

People lived on the Great Plains for centuries, long before they had horses. They hunted buffalo on foot and planted corn. Buffalo were extremely important to the Plains tribes. Before Europeans arrived, vast numbers of buffalo roamed the prairies, herds sometimes covering the landscape as far as the eye could see. Hunting buffalo was a dangerous business, whether on horseback or on foot. It always

required teamwork and cooperation within a community or by hunters from neighboring communities. The rituals that went before a big hunt, and in the celebrations that followed a successful hunt, men would dress up like buffalo, an animal they considered sacred even as they hunted them for food.

Tribes had huge gatherings in the spring and fall, when they made offerings to the spirits of the sky and earth and to tribal ancestors. They'd perform rituals such as the Sun Dance, which was an occasion for seeking visions; sometimes participants would mutilate themselves by sticking skewers in their chests and hanging from them, offering their suffering to the sky spirits.

REMEMBER

Not surprisingly, Plains mythology featured lots of buffalo.

The Lakota people get advice from the Great Spirit

Plains people believed in a Great Spirit, such as the Wakan Tanka of the Lakota; the rituals (repeated season after season and year after year to show respect and to ask for favor) that the Lakota performed for Wakan Tanka were tied in with beliefs in buffalo spirits. Myths explained the powers of the sun, moon, stars, animals, and rain; the origin of human rituals; and how humans came to hunt buffalo and not the other way around. (Head to the later section "The Arikara and the buffalo people" for that final story.)

The Lakota claimed that they learned all their rituals when two Lakota hunters met a beautiful woman dressed in white buckskin. One of the men tried to hit on her, but she turned him into a pile of bones. The other hunter listened when she told him to go get his chief and build a large tipi for her.

TECHNICAL STUFF

The Plains people used tipis as portable housing while they hunted on the prairies in the summer. In the winter, they returned to their permanent houses made of earth; that was when they took care of growing their crops.

The woman walked into the tipi. She introduced herself as the White Buffalo Woman and showed the chief the pipe and small round stone she carried. The pipe, she said, was for speaking to Wakan Tanka, the supreme being. Its symbolism was important for the following reasons:

- The bowl of the pipe represented the earth.
- The stem was made of wood and represented plants.

- The feathers hanging from the pipe represented birds.
- The stone was carved with a buffalo calf, representing all four-legged creatures.
- The seven circles on the stone represented the seven rites that used pipes.

She taught them the first ritual that day and returned later to teach them the rest. The rituals included ceremonies for releasing souls to the spirit world, purification in the *sweat lodge* (like a sauna, where people enjoyed spiritual visions after sitting in steamy heat) and searching for visions.

Shamans were people with especially close relationships with the spirits; *medicine men* were a step down from shamans. Shamans could enter a trance to talk to the spirits, and they could use their power to find game or heal the sick. ***Note:*** The indigenous people of North America didn't use the terms *shaman* or *medicine man*; Westerners came up with those terms.

The Arikara and the buffalo people

The Arikara people believed that once upon a time, buffalo looked like strong humans with horns. Instead of people hunting and eating them, they hunted and ate people.

The buffalo lived in a village near an ancient cottonwood tree with a big knot on it. When the buffalo priests prayed and knocked on this knot, humans came out of it. The buffalo hunted them like animals, clubbing them to death and cutting them up. The buffalo danced around a fire while their human meat dried as the surviving humans huddled inside their cottonwood tree. But all that changed when one human escaped and hid from the buffalo in the wilderness, as we explain in the following sections.

A human fights back

One day, the human who'd escaped the buffalo met one of the buffalo-humanoids, a lovely woman in white leather with horns on her head. She led him to a beautiful painted tipi and invited him to bed with her. She covered him with her white robe and gave him meat to eat. When he awoke, the tipi was gone, but the woman, Buffalo-Girl, was still there.

She told him that the buffalo people were looking for a man to turn them into proper animal buffalo and that he was the one to do the deed. She helped him sneak past the angry buffalo guards and brought him to the chief's tipi. (Some of the buffalo thought they could smell human meat, but the others said that was

only because they were still splattered with human blood from their hunt.) The man hid in a pile of animal skins.

He lay there and listened while the chief recited his hunting chants and practiced hitting the magic tree to get people to come out. The chief went out hunting the next morning, and Buffalo-Girl came back in. To give the young man courage and make him angry, she showed him the racks where the cuts of human meat were drying.

Then Buffalo-Girl took him to an ash tree and showed him how to make bows and arrows. He made as many as he could, enough for all the human warriors he hoped to summon. After that, she led the young man to the cottonwood tree and told the men inside that when the time came, each of them must take a bow and arrow and shoot a buffalo.

And they lived happily ever after

The young man waited for his moment to shoot the buffalo people (see the preceding section). The next day, the buffalo chief and his warriors came up to the tree and struck it to make the humans come out. Each of the men grabbed a bow and shot the buffalo men. The buffalo were so frightened they ran away, carrying chunks of human flesh with them. As each one was hit with an arrow, it turned into a real buffalo, grazing on prairie grass rather than eating human flesh.

Buffalo-Girl married the young man. Their children founded the Arikara nation. Whenever the Arikara ate buffalo, they left the chunk under the buffalo's foreleg uneaten, believing that it was the lump of human meat the buffalo carried right before its transformation.

THE ASTRONOMICAL PAWNEE

The Pawnee tribe, which still exists today, were very interested in astronomy. They venerated the North Star as a creator god and feared his opponent, the South Star. They thought the North and South Stars would come together at the end of the world. The Morning Star protected the Pawnee, while the Evening Star was its enemy. They had a ritual associated with the Morning and Evening Stars: The young warriors would sneak to an enemy camp and capture a young woman. The tribe kept her prisoner for a while, treating her kindly so she'd speak well of them to the gods. Then they'd strip her naked, paint her red and black to symbolize the Morning and Evening Stars, and then shoot her with arrows. Her blood was supposed to revive an ancient blessing and ensure prosperity.

Saguaro Cactus Flower in the Southwest

The North American Indians of the southwestern part of the United States had highly developed mythologies. They included the pueblo dwellers, such as the Hopi and the Zuni, and the semi-nomadic Navajo and Apache. The people in pueblos ate food they grew; the "three sisters" of corn, beans, and squash were their staples. The Apache and Navajo, on the other hand, didn't stay in one place for very long, so they didn't farm much; instead, they hunted and gathered wild animals and plants. The land was dry and could be difficult to survive in; the people of this area used myths and rituals to please the spirits, which was necessary so the spirits would send enough rain for crops to grow.

Southwestern mesas: Pueblo people mythology

The most highly organized tribes, including the Zuni and the Hopi, in the Southwest lived in large cities called *pueblos* built on top of mesas. Though these North American Indians now live in northern Arizona and New Mexico, before the arrival of the Europeans their territory stretched from Texas to Nevada to northern Mexico. For centuries these tribes shared a common culture, with most of their efforts aimed at growing and storing enough food to survive in the harsh desert climate. Pueblo mythology focuses on the relationships between humans and the natural world.

A Hopi Creation Myth: Four Worlds

The Hopi sun-spirit is called Tawa, and he figures in the Hopi creation myth. Like a lot of creation myths around the world, creating the world happened in stages, with a couple of false starts. Tawa first created First World, which was inhabited by creatures like insects who lived in caves and weren't very happy. To help them out, Tawa sent a spirit named Spider Grandmother to bring those creatures to a better world, Second World. When they got to Second World, they turned into wolves and bears. But since they still weren't happy, Tawa created Third World and had Spider Grandmother lead the wolves and bears to it. When they got there, they became human beings.

Because humans need technology to survive, Spider Grandmother taught them how to make pottery, how to weave, and how to make fire.

There are two different versions of how the Fourth World came into being. In one version, the people of Third World became evil, so Spider Grandmother made a hollow bamboo into a tunnel into a new world where only the good people could go. The Grand Canyon was said to be the remains of this tunnel.

In the other version, Tawa decides to destroy the evil Third World with a flood. (We talk about the flood stories that keep cropping up in the mythologies of the world in Chapter 17.) Spider Grandmother made little boats out of reeds that allowed the good people to sail away from Third World until they came to the mountains of Fourth World, which is the world we live in now.

The Anasazi (or "Old Ones")

People started living in the U.S. Southwest more than 2,000 years ago. Archaeologists don't know what they called themselves, so they use the name *Anasazi,* a Navajo word meaning "ancient enemies" — archaeologists don't always come up with the most culturally respectful names for people. The Anasazi are the ancestors of the modern Pueblo tribes, the Hopi and Zuni, who prefer to refer to them as the "Old Ones."

The Anasazi lived for centuries as hunter-gatherers. Around 900 CE, they began living in villages near the Chaco Canyon in New Mexico. They traded with people from Mexico and California. Around 1200 CE, they all moved into homes carved into cliffs in response to environmental stress and a need for easier defense. Less than a century later, many of them moved away all at once. Historians think they were converted to a new religion, the Pueblo *kachina* religion (see the following section).

Historians have traditionally thought the Anasazi were peaceful, but some evidence now indicates they may have waged war with the Pueblos around them. Archaeologists have found human skeletons with knife marks on them, and the bones broken to get at the marrow inside. These findings suggest that these "peaceful" people may have taken part in cannibalism.

Underground religion and kachinas

Pueblo families — members of groups such as the Hopi and the Zuni — lived in towns of apartments built of mud or carved into rock; each family had to store reserves of food in case the crops failed. Below the apartments were underground chambers called *kivas,* where the tribe held its religious ceremonies. To Pueblo people, the group is more important than the individual; everyone is expected to aid anyone in need. Religion and rituals help people live together, ensuring equality between and integration of social groups.

Pueblo people believe that ancestral spirits, called *kachinas,* permeated the world. The Zuni believe that at one time gods and kachinas walked the earth along with humans; that's part of their creation myth.

Kachinas can help people with health, happiness, and successful crops. For religious processions, men dress in colorful costumes impersonating kachinas, wearing elaborately decorated masks made of wood, hair, feathers, and leather. The kachina religion has been around for 700 years and is still practiced today.

Kokopelli, the flute player

Kokopelli, the flute-player (shown in Figure 25-1), is a prehistoric deity dating from Anasazi times over a thousand years ago. The oldest images of him date from 750 CE. He presides over childbirth and agriculture, the things that keep human society going. In some myths, Kokopelli carries little babies around with him and distributes them to women, who then get pregnant and give birth. This was part of his role as a god, but it made a lot of young women fear him. Kokopelli uses his flute playing, every year, to drive away winter and let spring come in so the game animals can breed and the crops can grow.

The Anasazi, or "Old Ones," were farmers on the Colorado Plateau (which covers parts of Colorado, Utah, New Mexico, and Arizona), a very central part of the continent, so the image of Kokopelli and his mythology easily traveled throughout the Southwest by trade and immigration. Now it's one of the Hopi kachinas and is common in the stories of North America's indigenous people.

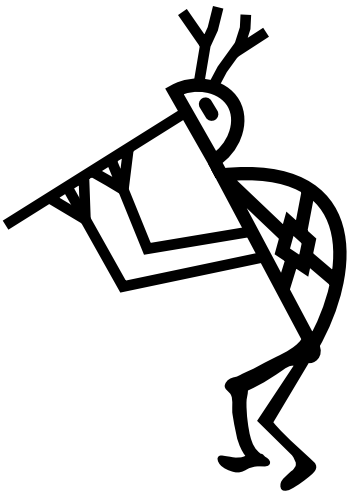

FIGURE 25-1: Kokopelli, the flute-player.

Southwestern hunters: Navajo and Apache tales

The Navajo and Apache lived in what's now Arizona and New Mexico, a land of arid *scrubland* (characterized largely by grasses and low shrubs), high mountains, and oases in valleys. The North American Indians in this area lived by hunting and gathering, supplemented by a few crops they grew for themselves. They added sheep herding to this mix after the Spanish invaders arrived. They had a semi-nomadic lifestyle, living in temporary shelters in the summers and in earth and wood huts called *hogans* in the winter.

The Navajo have many long and complex myths. Their religion, much of which was borrowed from Pueblo tribes, is based on maintaining a harmonious balance between the human and spirit worlds. Imbalance can result in disaster, so the appropriate rituals are essential.

Coyote trickster myths

Some myths of the North American indigenous folk may have had a moral purpose, but they're also good entertainment. One popular character is the creator-trickster. Coyote is one of the most popular trickster characters, appearing in myths all over the Southwest and the Plains; he lives on to a certain degree today in the animated character Wile E. Coyote.

CUNNING CRITTERS OF INDIGENOUS MYTH

Tricksters across the North American continent exhibit many of the same traits: Tricksters are clever but often bungle their enterprises through their own horseplay; they often end up injured or dead only to rise again undaunted.

Trickster myths can be extremely vulgar (too vulgar for this book!), which helps highlight the importance of moral rules. Trickster characters are often *culture heroes* as well, helping their people become civilized by giving them gifts such as fire or killing monsters that plague them. Storytellers and listeners alike loved trickster tales — the storytellers because they're fine material for embellishment, and the listeners because the characters and situations are so much fun. This aspect makes trickster tales an important part of the oral tradition.

Of the tricksters, Raven was a favorite in the Northwest, Rabbit was popular in the Southeast, and the Lakota people on the Plains liked Spider.

In one myth, Coyote plays a trick on a giant. The Navajo say that a long time ago, giants were everywhere. They were a problem because they liked to eat human children. Coyote decided to do something about this. He invited a giant to take a *sweat-bath* (like a sauna) with him. Inside the dark lodge, Coyote told the giant that he'd now perform a miracle: He'd break his own leg and heal it. He took a rock, pulled out a deer leg, and smashed it; he invited the giant to feel the broken part. Then he said "Leg, become whole!" and to the giant's astonishment, Coyote's leg was unbroken.

Coyote offered to perform the same stunt on the giant's leg, and the (not very smart) giant agreed. The giant, of course, screamed in pain when Coyote smashed his leg with the rock, but Coyote told him all he had to do to fix it was to spit on it. Then he slipped out of the lodge, leaving the giant spitting on his leg and moaning in agony.

The Wealthy Pacific Northwest

The Pacific Northwest is rich in natural resources such as fish and wild berries — so rich, in fact, that the North American Indians who lived there had no need to waste their time on agriculture. They lived in large villages near the mouths of rivers, where they'd take their canoes to catch salmon. Major tribes of the Pacific Northwest included the

- Tlingit
- Nez Perce
- Kwakiutl
- Coeur d'Alene
- Makah

A generous people

The Indigenous people of the Pacific Northwest were famous for their big parties called *potlatches.* At potlatch, the host family would serve their guests a great feast, entertain them with songs and dances (which also told the guests just how great the hosts were), and then give them presents. These presents were no mere party favors but extremely valuable items; a host family may give away most of its net worth at a potlatch. That was okay, though, because all their guests would have to hold their own potlatches and invite their hosts from previous feasts; that way, wealth got distributed to everyone. Many tribes held potlatches to commemorate special occasions, such as funerals or house dedications.

Animal tales from the Pacific Northwest

The people of the Pacific Northwest felt especially close to animals. In fact, they believed animals had a close kinship with humans because humans and animals used to be indistinguishable from one another. They adopted family animal totems (such as bears, salmon, and killer whales) to acknowledge the role these beings played in the lives of their tribal ancestors. They used their totems like team emblems, decorating their houses and clothes with pictures of their totem animals. Their myths show the importance of respecting fellow creatures.

Totem poles were tall wooden poles carved in the shape of various totems. They commemorated special people or events and informed visitors about the history and affiliations of the tribe; they also let visitors know where they'd be welcomed because people who shared totems were considered kin.

In Pacific Northwestern myths, the *Thunderbird* is a supernatural creature, an eagle with a head on its stomach. Lightning comes out of its beak and thunder roars when it flaps its wings.

Hunting is for food, not sport

Pacific Northwestern myth tells stories of the Wolf Clan, who lived near a river. There they could find many wild salmon and berries, which fed them well and made them wealthy. According to one tale, as time went on the younger people grew careless and irresponsible. They'd kill animals and leave them to rot, and they'd slit the backs of salmon to put torches in them so the fish would swim down the river lit up. The older people warned them that trouble would come. And sure enough, at the end of the salmon season, the ghosts woke up and had their vengeance: The mountains broke open and fire gushed out, burning most of the forest and destroying most of the tribe.

Of bears and people

Princess Rhpisunt, daughter of the chief of the Wolf Clan, was gathering berries in the forest when she stepped in bear feces. She complained about this incident for hours, blaming all bears for being so nasty. She gradually wandered away from her friends and ended up quite alone.

A young man found her and invited her back home with him; she agreed to follow him and ended up marrying him. The lodge where he lived was full of big people and bearskin coats; old slaves wandered around sleepily.

A woman called Mouse Woman introduced herself and told Rhpisunt that this was the house of the Bear People. Mouse Woman also said that the Bear People were insulted by her criticism of their droppings. It wasn't a good idea to insult the Bear

People, who were pretty quick-tempered and sensitive. Mouse Woman said that all the sad slaves in the house were people who had once insulted the Bear People. Inside the house, the Bear People looked like people, but whenever one went outside, they put on a bearskin coat and turned into bears.

So this was a dangerous place, especially for Princess Rhpisunt, who had insulted her new hosts! Mouse Woman gave her some advice, which Rhpisunt took.

Every time Rhpisunt went out to relieve herself, she buried her own excrement and put a piece of copper on the ground on top of the filled-in hole. After a while the Bear People noticed this and thought that Rhpisunt's excrement was shining copper! Impressed by this, the Bear People decided that Rhpisunt was justified in taking a superior attitude in the matter of excrement, so her life was no longer in danger.

Several months went by. Back home, Rhpisunt's family had been looking for her. They were afraid she'd been eaten by a bear, so they began hunting bears enthusiastically. By this time, Rhpisunt was pregnant, and her husband took her to a place in the mountains where she could have her babies safe from the hunters. She gave birth to twin cubs, strong and healthy.

Rhpisunt's brothers kept looking for her with the help of her dog. One day Rhpisunt's husband, one of the Bear People, told her that her brothers were hunting all the bears, and that one of her brother's was sure to kill him any day now. Sure enough, Rhpisunt's brother came into the neighborhood on his hunt, saw Rhpisunt's husband in bear-form, and killed him.

Rhpisunt and her two bear-cub little sons went back to her father's house. As soon as her sons entered the house, they took off their bear coats and became human. Perhaps feeling regrets about the death of the boys' bear-father, their grandfather, Rhpisunt's dad, made them a tall pole that the boys could climb to see their other grandfather's house. And after Rhpisunt grew old and died, her sons turned back into bears and moved back in with the Bear People. From then on, the Bear People and Rhpisunt's tribe remembered that they were relatives and helped each other hunt.

The Part of Tens

IN THIS PART . . .

Discover ten mythological monsters you may encounter (in your reading — hopefully not in real life).

Peruse eleven mythological places you may or may not want to visit.

IN THIS CHAPTER

- Giving heroes a purpose
- Scaring mortals into good behavior
- Flying, prancing, and slithering around the ancient world

Chapter 26
Ten Mythological Monsters

Myths are full of monsters. Heroes need monsters to fight; otherwise, how could they be heroic? Besides, gods use monsters to scare people. And in a mythological world where gods can take the shapes of animals and have kids with mortal humans, who knows what those offspring may turn out looking like?

Apart from being colorful characters and villains in mythological stories, many of these monsters have become symbols of abstract ideas — human ambition, death and rebirth, and (very often) the idea that the natural world can and does keep secrets from humans.

Brace yourself, because in this chapter, we frighten you with descriptions of Gorgons, dragons, griffins, the Loch Ness Monster, and more. We also tell you about some not-so-scary creatures, like unicorns and the Phoenix.

Gorgons

According to Homer, only one *Gorgon,* a monster of the underworld, existed. But the poet Hesiod mentions three of them: Stheno (the Powerful One), Euryale (the One Who Sees Far), and Medusa (the Queen of the Gorgons). They're the

daughters of Phorcys, a sea-god, and his wife, the goddess Ceto. According to Pausanias, the ancient travel writer, the people of Athens said the Gorgons were daughters of Gaia, the Earth, which she produced to help her children fight against other gods.

Gorgons have wings and snakes for hair. They're so horrible looking that anyone who looked directly at them turned to stone; Medusa's name survives today as a symbol of supreme ugliness. The Greeks used artistic representations of Gorgons to ward off evil. The statue of Athena in the Parthenon in Athens held a shield bearing a Gorgon's face; that comes from the tale of Perseus, who killed Medusa and gave her head to Athena, as we describe in Chapter 6.

Chimera

The *Chimera* is a female monster that looks like a lion in front, a goat in the middle, and a dragon in the tail. She can also breathe fire. (Female monsters have a hard time in Greek myths.)

In modern English, a *chimera* is a figment of the imagination. The word shows up as an adjective, too: "In the 1950s, a computer that could fit in a briefcase was considered to be a chimerical idea." Architects sometimes use the word *chimera,* or its French translation, *chimère,* to refer to any strange creature used as a decoration on a building.

The Phoenix

This mythical beast first appeared in Egypt, but you can also find it in Greek, Islamic, and later European mythology. The *Phoenix* is a bird the size of an eagle with red and gold feathers that sings beautifully. Only one Phoenix can live at a time, but each one lives for 500 years (or for a very long time, depending on the account you read). When it reaches the end of its life, it collects sweet-smelling twigs to build a nest and then settles into the nest and bursts into flames. After it burns completely away, a new, baby Phoenix rises from the ashes and begins its long life.

For the Egyptians, the Phoenix represented death and rebirth, the immortal soul. Since then, the phoenix has served as a symbol of eternal strength for any entity that claims the ability to overcome setbacks and keep on going — the Roman Empire was one.

Cerberus

Homer mentioned a hound of hell that Heracles brought up from the underworld as one of his Twelve Labors. (You can read about those in Chapter 6.) Later, Greek mythology got more specific. First, the hell hound got a name, *Cerberus.* Then it got a fuller description. Cerberus is like a dog but with three vicious heads and, in place of his tail, a venomous serpent. He guards the underworld; his heads keep the living away, and his tail keeps the dead in their place.

The Roman travel writer Pausanias, who was something of a dog-lover, objected to describing the underworld-guarding monster as a dog because, after all, the dog is the "friend of man."

Dragons

Dragons are huge and snaky; everyone agrees on that much. But because dragons appear in mythology from Europe, the Mediterranean, Africa, the Middle East, and Asia, a lot of variation exists.

Starting in the 1800s scholars have found pretty solid evidence that the ancient peoples of Greece and Africa were familiar with the fossil remains of dinosaurs. This evidence may explain why dragon myths are so common.

Some Northern European dragons didn't have hind legs (some did, and looked like flying lizards), but all Asian dragons did. Greek dragons seem to have spent their time on the ground, like snakes, but Chinese and Japanese dragons are creatures of the air. However, Asian dragons didn't usually have wings, while European dragons often did. Some dragons could breathe fire, and others couldn't.

Dragons symbolize different things. In Mesopotamia, the original female goddess who gave birth to the other gods is a dragon. The Egyptian god Apepi is a dragon-god who rules the world of darkness and evil. In Greek myths, the dragons — which the Greeks called *drakontes,* the origin of the name — are often clever, magical creatures from inside the earth. Athena has a snake (*drako* in Greek) that's her pet and helper. The Chinese thought of the dragon as the male half of the universal order — the *yang* in *yin-yang* (head to Chapter 22). And in the Hebrew Bible, the "serpent" who talks to Eve in the Garden of Eden is "the most subtle of God's creatures."

Because the pre-Christian world of Europe and the Mediterranean was so full of images of dragons, medieval Christianity used the dragon as a symbol of the non-Christian, pagan world. But dragons were too interesting to give up; the dragon often appeared as a symbol for Saxon England, and the Welsh coat of arms today has a dragon on it.

Unicorn

The nicest and most cuddly of the mythological "monsters" is the *unicorn.* It looks like a horse with a single horn growing from the center of its forehead. Unicorns appear in the art of Greece and Rome and even earlier in the art of Mesopotamia. The Greek writer Ctesias, who lived in the fifth century BCE, described a *monokeros* (or "one horn," which in Latin is *unicornis*). It had a purple head and blue eyes; a white body; and a red, black, and white horn.

From antiquity onward, people thought the unicorn's horn had the magical ability to purify and heal; medieval Christians saw the unicorn as a symbol of Christ because of its mild nature and its healing powers. The unicorn could purify a polluted spring by dipping its horn in it. Medicines made from the horn supposedly had all sorts of healing properties. "Unicorn horn" was worth 20 times its weight in gold in medieval Europe (what was sold was actually the long, spiral horn of the *narwhal,* a whale that lives in the cold northern seas).

Griffon

The *griffon* (also spelled *griffin* or *gryphon*) has a lion's body, wings (sometimes), and an eagle's head. Some of them have ears like horses, too. The earliest images of griffons come from Mesopotamian art of around 1800 BCE, but by 1500 BCE, the creature had spread all around the Middle East and Mediterranean world. The Minoan Greeks on the island of Crete — a rich and artistic civilization during the Bronze Age, around 1400 BCE — painted griffons with fancy, curled manes around their beaky heads. Griffons seem to have been important symbols, because they show up on art associated with kings, with temples, and with the burials of wealthy people.

Sphinx

The *sphinx* is a very, very old mythological monster. Sphinxes showed up in Greek art starting around 1600 BCE and were common all around the ancient world ever after. The Greeks thought the name *sphinx* came from the Greek verb that means "to strangle," but modern scholars are dubious about this explanation. Greek sphinxes are female monsters with human heads, lion bodies, and snakes for tails (in some accounts) or tails like a lion's. They appeared in all kinds of art but were especially common on official seals — small, carved stones used for pressing into wax or clay to make something official. These sealing sphinxes were usually sitting with one paw raised, like a dog shaking hands.

The most famous sphinx is the Sphinx, the big statue at Giza in Egypt with a lion's body and a man's head. The head is that of Pharaoh Khafre, who ruled around 2500 BCE. The most famous story involving a sphinx is the story of Oedipus, which the tragedian Sophocles turned into a very famous play (check out Chapter 8 for more about it). Mostly because of this story, the sphinx has long been a symbol of deep wisdom.

Scylla and Charybdis

Scylla and Charybdis appear in Homer's *Odyssey*, the story of how the hero Odysseus made his way, over ten years, back from the Trojan War to his home in Ithaca. After many adventures, the last monster he and his men face is Scylla, a sort of dragon that lives in a cave in a cliff face high above the sea. She has six heads, and if a ship ever sails too close, she snatches six sailors off the deck and eats them.

So just steer clear of that bit of coastline, right? Well, on the other side of the narrow body of water where Scylla lives is Charybdis, a huge whirlpool capable of sucking any ship down to the bottom and smashing it to bits. (For that reason, Charybdis isn't actually a monster but rather a scary natural phenomenon.)

Odysseus, who at this point in the story has lost all the ships in his fleet except his own, has news of these dangers from the witch-goddess Circe. He has a tough call to make: Either certainly lose the whole ship or certainly lose six men. He can't argue with the math, so he steers close to the shore. He loses six of his comrades, who cry out pitifully as Scylla snatches them up, but the ship gets through. You can read all about the *Odyssey* in Chapter 7.

The Loch Ness Monster

Loch Ness is a large lake in northern Scotland. The river Ness flows into it from the north, giving the lake its name (*loch* is "lake" in Scottish Gaelic). The lake is 23 miles long, and it runs 755 feet deep at its deepest point. If that abysmal depth weren't scary enough, the peat moss that grows all over that part of Scotland gets into the water to make it extra dark and murky. Just the place for a monster!

Tales of a monster in the lake go back to around 550 and the writings of Adamnán of Iona, sometimes called by the Latin form of his name, Adamnanus. He wrote that a century earlier, the Irish monk Saint Columba found a funeral party burying a man by the shores of the river Ness. The locals explained that he'd been killed by a "water beast." Columba sent his servant to swim across the lake, and when the "water beast" tried to attack, the Saint drove it away with the Christian sign of the cross.

From the 1870s to the 1930s, various reports surfaced of people seeing strange creatures in or near Loch Ness. A 1933 article in a Scottish newspaper describing a sighting by someone named Aldie Mackay made the mystery famous around the world. That article was the first to use the term *monster.*

A photograph published in 1934 seems to show a creature in the water looking like a dinosaur. Robert Kenneth Wilson, a London gynecologist, took the picture, and *The Daily Mail* published it. For half a century, this picture, known as "the Surgeon's Photograph," was held up as the best proof of the existence of a monster. The monster got so famous in the later 20th century that people everywhere knew it as "Nessie."

Repeated expeditions, some more scientific than others, have tried and failed to find the monster or evidence of its existence. In the 1990s, several (then very old) men admitted to having faked the Surgeon's Photograph in order to make *The Daily Mail* look ridiculous.

Today, most scientists interested in the topic think that Nessie is either entirely mythological or — if people are actually seeing something in those dark waters — an extraordinarily large eel or catfish (both are species found in Loch Ness).

IN THIS CHAPTER

- Reading up on realms of the dead
- Looking at locales shrouded in mystery
- Turning real places into idyllic ideals

Chapter 27
Ten (Plus One) Mythological Places

Any tour guide in Central America, Japan, Greece, or Egypt can take you to places where, according to myth, gods once spoke to humans or heroes fought monsters. But some mythological locations are themselves mythological. Some of these places are real enough places on the map that have gained mythological status through stories told about them, usually by people who had never been there. Others may have once existed, but their locations are long forgotten and only the mythology remains. Others are entirely fictional but nevertheless have a real existence in the world of mythology.

In this chapter, we take you to the heavens, the underworld, and other places where you can live your afterlife. We show you idyllic islands, lost kingdoms, two rivers in the Greek Underworld, and a very real meeting-place in Ireland. And not all these mythological places are especially old!

Elysium, or Elysian Fields

Elysium is the closest thing the ancient Greeks had to a heaven. Only the very best dead people get to go there. According to Homer, Zeus's mortal sons go straight to Elysium without having to die first, and they live there in perfect happiness forever. See Chapters 3 and 4 for more on the Greeks' view of the world.

REMEMBER

The place most dead people went wasn't especially bad — no burning fires or devils with pitchforks — but it wasn't especially fun, either. It was preferable, though, to the eternal torment of Tartarus, where the worst sinners went.

In Homer's tales, and according to the poet Hesiod, Elysium is a mystical land far off to the west of Greece, near the great river Oceanos that circled the world. (The Greeks gave the name Oceanos, "Ocean," to what they thought was a big river that circled the world; we call it the Atlantic Ocean.) By Roman times, Elysium had relocated to some undefined place under the earth, but the blessed dead still got to go there. According to the Roman poet Virgil, they kept doing whatever job they had done in life and continued to enjoy doing it forever.

Xibalba

Xibalba is the very scary "place of terror," the underworld or land of the dead according to Mayan mythology. *Popul Vuh,* the Mayan epic written in the K'iche' language describes it; it's where the terrifying Mayan death-gods live.

According to some myths, the dead get there through a cave in what's now Guatemala. Other versions say that the entrance is in Belize, and still others point to the Milky Way as the "road to Xibalba." Wherever it starts, the road isn't easy. It requires crossing a river of scorpions and swimming through a river of pus.

The place is ruled by 12 death gods with names (translated from the K'iche') like "One Death," "Seven Death," "Flying Scab," "Jaundice Demon," and everyone's favorite, "Backpack-strap," whose seemingly benign and functional name masks the fact that he's the god responsible for people dying on long walks from coughing up blood.

TIP

The place is so awful that Mayan mythology talks about how the hero-twins Hunapú and Ixbalanqué "tamed" it a little by defeating the death-gods on the famous ball court; you can find that story in Chapter 24.

Hy-Brasil, or Brasil

Irish mythology imagined an island west of the country out in the Atlantic that the Irish called Hy-Brasil, or sometimes just Brasil. There are a number of myths surrounding the figure of Saint Brendan of Clonfert, who lived in the late 400s and early 500s CE. He was a great traveler and one story says that he found an "Island of the Blessed" off the west coast of Ireland. He was allowed to visit, but after he left, the island disappeared. Other stories like *The Voyage of Bran, son of Febail* (600s CE) and *The Voyage of Máel Dúin* (around 900 CE) tell of an island that appears only briefly from time to time and then disappears.

The island started showing up on Irish maps in the 1300s and then made it into other maps and atlases in later centuries. The Venetian mapmaker Andrea Bianco drew it as one of the islands of the Azores in 1463, but people didn't start seriously looking for it until the 1480s. Various explorers claimed to have seen it. In 1862, it was proposed that the Porcupine Bank, a bit of shallow water to the west of Ireland, was the basis for the myth.

TIP

You may be tempted to think the nation of Brazil is named based on this myth, but scholars don't think it is. When the Portuguese discovered Brazil (by bumping into it as they sailed their ships across the Atlantic on their way down to Africa), they discovered that it was a source for "brazilwood," which gets its name from the Portuguese *pau-brasil,* or "redwood" (from the Latin *brasa,* or "glowing ember").

Arcadia

Arcadia is a real place located in the central part of *the Peloponnesus,* the southern peninsula of Greece. In ancient times, Arcadia was a mountainous backwater populated by poor shepherds just getting by.

To aristocratic Romans, though, the life of the people in Arcadia seemed ideal compared to the stress of Roman politics in the big city. Roman poets invented a mythical "Arcadia": a peaceful place where simple folks live simple lives in harmony with nature. The poet Virgil wrote a bunch of poems about happy shepherds and their girlfriends cavorting on the Arcadian hills. The Arcadia of myth is mountainous but green, filled with minor gods and happy peasants whose lives are plain but satisfying and who celebrate quaint festivals when they aren't dozing in a meadow while their flocks graze nearby.

The Idea of Arcadia as an idyllic wilderness stuck around. Philip Sydney wrote about Arcadia in a very popular, somewhat erotic novel in 1578. Perhaps it inspired Christopher Marlowe, who in 1599 wrote a (romantic, but not at all erotic) poem called "The Passionate Shepherd to His Love."

TIP

In Walt Disney's 1940 film *Fantasia*, the sequence set to the music of Beethoven's *Pastoral Symphony* is as good an image of the mythological Arcadia as anyone will find anywhere.

Valhalla

Valhalla is the Hall of Dead Warriors from Norse mythology. In Valhalla, the dead warriors eat the "bottomless boar," which is slaughtered every day, eaten, and reborn at the end of the evening. A goat's udder produces liquor for them. When they aren't feasting on pork and getting drunk, the warriors fight each other — why not, they're already dead! — and wait for the last battle of Ragnarok. See Chapter 12 for more on Norse myths.

Atlantis

The Greek philosopher Plato recounted the story of Atlantis in a *fictional dialogue* (that means it's not true!). This tale says an island called Atlantis that was bigger than Libya and Asia combined once sat beyond the Pillars of Hercules (the ancient name for the Straits of Gibraltar) and was the home of a powerful kingdom. The whole island sank into the sea after an earthquake.

During the Middle Ages, Europeans forgot about much of the learning of the Greeks, but the Arab world didn't. The myth of Atlantis came back to Europe through the writings of Arab geographers. Europeans who heard the story wondered whether Atlantis may have been the Canary Islands off the west coast of Africa, or perhaps someplace in Scandinavia — or even the Americas. A popular modern theory is that the Atlantis story actually refers to the island of Thera (modern Santorini), which was blown almost entirely to bits by a volcanic eruption in 1500 BCE. Today, only a crescent-shaped island remains, with the center completely gone.

The Kingdom of Prester John

In the early 1070s, the Seljuq Turks conquered Jerusalem. The Christians of Europe freaked out because their Holy City was now in the hands of Muslims. This event began the *Crusades* — a long unhappy period in the long unhappy history of a city that's sacred to three great religions.

The Europeans were eager to recapture the Holy Land and looked for help from wherever it may come. In 1145, the Pope received news of a certain Prester John, who was supposedly the descendent of one of the *Magi,* the Wise Men who visited the infant Jesus from the east. The report claimed that Prester John was a Christian king, lord of a powerful empire in Asia, who was marching west to help reconquer the Holy Land. A similar letter with promise of assistance arrived at all the powerful courts of Europe in 1165.

Pope Alexander III wrote back, but no army of Christian Asians ever showed up. Despite this disappointment, Europeans continued to wonder about the Kingdom of Prester John. Many travelers journeyed to Asia looking for it — Giovanni da Pian del Carpini, Giovanni da Montecorvino, and (of course) Marco Polo. None of them found it, but they did make profitable contacts with the real empire of China. When Europeans started sailing across the Atlantic, but before they realized that the continent on the other side isn't Asia, they still hoped to find Prester John and his marvelous kingdom.

Avalon

Avalon (also called "Avilion") is the magical island where King Arthur went after his last battle, where his wounds would be healed and he'd remain until the time was ripe for his return. (Chapter 14 has the Arthur story.) One tradition says that Avalon isn't actually an island but the town of Glastonbury, which is associated in some Celtic myths with the "land of dead heroes." But many people think that the monks who lived in Glastonbury invented that story to bring tourists to their area and help the local economy. Avalon is now a symbol of any mystical, happy place.

The River Styx

Ancient Greek mythology, particularly about the underworld, is by no means a consistent, coherent, or systematic body of stories. But in many Greek accounts, the land of the dead is bounded by five (dark, scary) rivers: Acheron, Cocytus, Lēthē, Phlegethon, and Styx. The Styx is the most important.

According to the Greeks, when the world was young and Zeus had just defeated the older generation of gods to make himself king of the gods, he promoted the river-goddess Styx to the oath-keeper of the gods. Whenever gods made solemn promises, they had to swear by Styx.

The river Styx is said to have magical properties. In some myths (but not in the *Iliad* or *Odyssey*), the goddess Thetis dips her (mortal) son Achilles into its waters to make him invulnerable. Alas, she holds him by his ankles, with her palm over the back of his heel, which doesn't get wet. After ten years of hard fighting in the Trojan War, Achilles is hit by an arrow right in that spot and is killed. This story is the origin of the phrase *Achilles' heel,* used when someone who's otherwise awesome or successful has one aspect of their character that's a crippling weakness.

In many myths, a ferry boat takes the souls of the dead across Styx from the land of the living to the land of the dead. The pilot of that boat is Charon, and he demands a fee for the crossing. So the Greeks would often put a coin in the mouths of their dead loved ones to help them pay for their passage into the next world.

The River Lēthē

According to ancient Greek mythology, one mythologically famous river in the land of the dead is the river Lēthē. (Check out the preceding section for a list of all the underworld rivers.) Lēthē is the River of Forgetfulness. People passing in death into the underworld across Lēthē forget what being alive was like, however great they may once have been.

That's grim and sad, but the Christian poet Dante gave it a more positive spin. His three-part poem *The Divine Comedy* gives a picture of hell (in *Inferno*); *purgatory,* a place where people can work off their sins on their way to heaven (in *Purgatorio*); and heaven (in *Paradiso*). Dante is describing a Christian worldview, but he uses a lot of material from the Greeks and Romans. In *Paradiso,* souls who have climbed the Mountain of Purgatory for a few thousand years, paying off all their sins, are finally ready to enter heaven. But for Dante, heaven was a place of perfect happiness, and you can't be perfectly happy if you can remember when you were a sinner. So he has his dead souls cross Lēthē in order to forget all their evil past and be ready for an eternity of sinless happiness.

Tara

Throughout this book, we make a point to mention that that *myth* doesn't mean "fiction." The Irish place *Tara* is a good example of this characteristic of mythology. The place is mythological because it features in some famous and important Irish myths (see Chapter 15), particularly those about Queen Maeve. But it's also a very real place you can visit today.

Teamhair or Cnoc na Teamhrach is the Irish name for what you can call the "Hill of Tara" in County Meath, which is a little northwest of Dublin. It was said to be the ancient site where kings were crowned and where the nobles met for political meetings or to plan wars. The site is dotted with stone monuments going all the way back to the Stone Age, 3200 BCE.

In Irish mythology, Queen Maeve is raped by her ex-husband Conchobar at Tara during a meeting of lords and warriors. The story of Finn MacCool (Fionn mac Cumhaill) begins when his father, Cumhaill, rebels against High King Conn, the king-over-all-other-kings, who rules from Tara. Later, Finn becomes leader of the *Fianna,* the ancient Irish special forces who served the High King at Tara.

TIP

The name "Tara" doesn't always mean you're dealing with someone or someplace Irish. "Tara" is four letters and easy to say. Consequently, you can find places named Tara on every continent except Antarctica, as well as people named Tara from countries around the world. They don't all have to do with the Irish Tara!

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Dedication

We'd like to dedicate this book to our parents: Dr. William Hackney, MD; Dr. Marcella Hackney, PhD; Marian Blackwell, MS, RN; and Dr. Albert Blackwell, PhD, who were always models of how smart people could have open minds, endless curiosity, and a sense of humor.

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